

Rascal
DOES NOT DREAM
of
Petite
Devil!
Kohai

Hajime
kamoshida

Illustration by
KEJI MIZOGUCHI



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Rascal DOES NOT DREAM of petite Devil Kohai

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Chapter 1 The Rascal Has No Tomorrow

Chapter 2 Do the Winds of Tomorrow Blow Tomorrow?

Chapter 3 The Start of a Relationship Lie

Chapter 4 All My Lies to You

Chapter 5 Laplace's Mini-Demon

Last Chapter The World You Chose



Sakuta turned his eyes to the screen. He *did* know the girl on it. It was a commercial for a sports drink. The same blue-labeled drink he had in his hand right now.

Mai Sakurajima

Third-year at Minegahara High.
A famous actress who has been working since she was a child.

Kaede Azusagawa

Sakuta's little sister. Afraid to leave the house because of bullying in her past.

Sakuta Azusagawa

Second-year at Minegahara High. Should be officially dating Mai, but...



"I think it's cute."
"D-don't say cute!"
"Then what do you
want me to say?"
"...Cute, I guess?"

**Tomoe
Koga**

First-year at
Minegahara High.
After a certain
turn of events,
she makes a deal
with Sakuta, and
they pretend to be
a couple.

Rascal
DOES NOT DREAM
of
petite
Devil
Kohai♥

Hajime kamoshida

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New York

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Rascal Does Not Dream of Petite Devil Kohai Hajime Kamoshida

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Sakuta Azusagawa had woken up yesterday morning.



the Rascal has NO Tomorrow

1

“And a big win for the Japan team!”

The morning news anchor sounded particularly enthusiastic.

“Good morning. Today is Friday, June twenty-seventh. Our top story today is the results of yesterday’s big game.”

The living room TV was showing a highlight reel from the World Cup, which was currently being held on the other side of the world. The second match of the group stage had been played in the middle of the night, Japan time.

The Japan team had been a point behind as the first half drew to an end. A Japanese player (number ten) had been doing some fancy dribbling when the opponent’s aggressive defense sent him tumbling. Whistles echoed through the stadium. That had earned them a free kick from just outside the penalty box.

Number four set the ball and took two steps back for the run-up.

The tension was palpable.

Sakuta Azusagawa watched in stunned horror.

“I’ve seen this before...,” he muttered.

And not on the midnight live broadcast. He’d seen this exact same highlight reel...*yesterday morning*. He knew Japan’s number four was about to kick the ball, the other team’s keeper would dive the wrong way, and the ball would soar right into the goal.

Sakuta gulped, watching. Number four’s kick scored exactly the way he remembered, netting the team a goal.

Their opponents’ faces fell as they bit their lips in anguish now that their lead had evaporated. Behind them, number four celebrating his successful free kick. The Japan team swarmed him, everyone cheering.

Japan had used the momentum from that point to score another goal in the back half. They’d maintained the one-point lead and secured a victory.

Sakuta grimly watched this identical result play out and went back to his

room, trying to shake off the questions flooding his mind. He looked at the alarm clock by his bed. The digital screen showed the date.

June 27.

The same date announced by the newscaster.

“But how...?”

Sakuta was sure today *should* be June 28. The day before, both the TV and his clock clearly said June 27. This meant today was yesterday and yesterday was today.

“...Ahhh, I see. Must be a dream.”

Sakuta flung himself onto his bed, pulled the covers over him, and went back to sleep.

If this was yesterday, he could just sleep till tomorrow.

But no sooner had his eyes closed than the door opened.

“I thought you were up!” Kaede said. His little sister.

Her footsteps came closer.

“You can’t go back to sleep! Get up!”

She started shaking him.

“I’m gonna sleep until it’s tomorrow.”

“You don’t care about school?”

“Nope.”

“Then I’m gonna sleep with you!”

She grabbed the covers and tried to burrow under.

“Well, I’d better get up,” Sakuta said, sitting up.

“Huh? Already?”

He moved out as Kaede’s panda pajamas moved in. Escaping reality could only get him so far. He headed back to the living room.

The morning news was still talking about soccer.

Kaede came pattering after him.

“Hey, Kaede...”

“Yes?”

“This is gonna sound weird.”

“Um...like in a dirty way?”

“No.”

“Keep your mind out of the gutter!” Kaede said. She covered her face with both hands, wriggling about and refusing to listen.

“We saw the same news yesterday, right?”

“...The soccer news?” Kaede asked, peeking through her fingers.

“Yeah.”

“Um...I’m pretty sure I didn’t.”

She didn’t seem to know what he meant. Her brow furrowed.

“That’s what I was afraid of... In that case, don’t worry about it.”

Sakuta had a nasty feeling in his gut. The kind you get when you know you’re in trouble.

With that lingering sense that something was wrong, he ate breakfast with Kaede. When no explanation seemed forthcoming, Sakuta decided he’d better head to school.

Maybe he’d learn more if left home.

“See you soon!” Kaede called after him, grinning.

He got off the elevator on the first floor, took a deep breath, and started the walk to the station.

Sakuta paid a lot more attention to his surroundings today. He went through the residential area, which was full of apartment buildings and houses. He passed the park, crossed the bridge, and reached the main thoroughfare. As he neared the station, tall buildings began appearing: business hotels, home electronics stores, et cetera.

Nothing struck him as particularly out of the ordinary. There were people headed to the station like he was and housewives taking out the trash. The man from the flower shop was sweeping the sidewalk out front.

Ten minutes on foot took him to Fujisawa Station, at the heart of Kanagawa Prefecture's very own Fujisawa City. Crowds of office workers and students on their daily commutes. Businessmen changing to the Tokaido Line. Students rushing through the Odakyu gates. A fair number of people, like Sakuta, crossing the connective passage to the Enoshima Electric Railway (Enoden) Station.

Nobody looked at all lost or confused. Everyone just plodding along their usual routes. Nobody stepping out of line. Sakuta was the only one looking around, watching the crowds.

"Is it just me...?"

By the time he stepped through the Enoden Fujisawa Station gates, the possibility seemed alarmingly certain.

The train rolled in a couple of minutes later. A short four-car train with a retro style. The bell rang, the door closed, and the train rolled out.

After a bumpy fifteen-minute ride, he arrived at Shichirigahama Station, by the coast. It was only a few minutes' walk from there to Sakuta's school, Minegahara High.

A pack of students in matching uniforms shuffled out of the station. The moment they emerged, they could smell the sea. Summer was almost here, and in ten more days, the beaches would be open to swimmers. The area would be swarming with beachgoers.

Sakuta glanced at the water and saw a crowd of wind surfers taking advantage of a rare clear day in the middle of the rainy season.

Everything was as it should be. Nothing felt out of place.

The short walk from the station was filled with the sounds of chattering students. A couple of first-year boys goofing off. A third-year with her nose in a study guide. A group of girls excitedly discussing their karaoke session from the day before.

Everything exactly as it always was.

Nobody was saying anything like “Didn’t we do today already?” “I knew it! I said we were!” “Seriously? That’s so scary.” Why would they?

Sakuta alone felt trapped in a dream, confused by his second June 27.

He passed through the school gates. As he reached the entrance, one of his two friends came over. Yuuma Kunimi.

“Sup, Sakuta. Another amazing bed head.”

Yuuma was on his way in from morning basketball practice, wearing knee-length gym shorts and a T-shirt. Plenty of students sat through classes dressed like that, not changing into their uniforms until after school. Yuuma was one of them.

“This hairstyle’s all the rage these days.”

“You’re on the cutting edge of fashion.”

Yuuma laughed just like he always did—but Sakuta remembered this conversation. They’d had the exact same one in Sakuta’s memories of yesterday.

“.....”

“Something wrong, Sakuta?”

“.....No.”

“Seriously, what?”

“That handsome face of yours is infuriating.”

“Huh? This again?”

Unable to admit he was repeating a day, Sakuta went for the easy jab and headed to class.

Morning classes were math, physics, English, and Modern Japanese. All of them covered the exact same content Sakuta had learned the day before. The math teacher’s “This’ll be on the test, people,” the physics teacher’s groan-inducing pun, the English teacher’s “Mr. Azusagawa, listen to me!” and the lipstick stain on the Modern Japanese teacher’s collar were all exactly as they’d

been in Sakuta's yesterday.

The more time passed, the more Sakuta's suspicions changed to certainty.

I'm sure this is yesterday...but only I remember it.

That alone changed a totally normal school day into a nightmare.

Had the world gone mad? Or just Sakuta?

"Nah...definitely the world."

His senses were all working fine. Everything felt real. He could find no evidence to suggest this was a dream.

And then lunchtime came.

"If today is yesterday, then..."

Sakuta had promised to meet someone. This was worth looking into. He rose to leave.

Ten minutes later, Sakuta was in an empty classroom on the third floor. The windows offered a view of the sea. Across the desk from him was a third-year, Mai Sakurajima.

Elegant, even features, as beautiful as any celebrity—to be fair, that's exactly what Mai was. She had been working as an actress since she was a child. Famed across the nation. For the last two years, she'd been on hiatus and had only recently started taking offers again.

But here she was, sitting across from him with a lunch she'd made herself spread out between them. The same menu Sakuta had eaten the day before.

Fried chicken, egg rolls, a side of *hijiki* and soybeans, potato salad, and cherry tomatoes.

He grabbed a bite of each with his chopsticks, sampling them. They weren't strongly seasoned but had a lovely, delicate flavor. They looked and tasted exactly as Sakuta remembered.

"....."

What the hell was going on? He was clueless.

“Is it not good?”

“Mm?”

He glanced up and found her looking upset. She wasn't even trying to hide it.

He'd been so lost in thought that he'd neglected to tell her what he thought of her lunch. Sakuta had the day before, so he'd forgotten this time.

“It's all really great!”

“It sure didn't look like it.”

“I swear it is! I'd love to eat this every day.”

“Turning this into a Showa-era marriage proposal won't save you now. You were thinking about something else the whole time you ate *my* lunch.”

Mai could be really perceptive like that.

“I was thinking about how blessed I am to get to eat your home cooking, Mai.”

He felt like he shouldn't bring her in on this just yet. Sakuta himself was far too unsure as to what was going on. Explaining things to her while they were so unclear would just give her reason to worry.

“Hmph.”

Mai did not sound at all convinced and made certain he knew it.

“Mai, can I ask something weird?”

“Is it something dirty?”

Kaede had reacted the same way. What had he done to deserve this reputation?

“I'm not telling you what color my underwear is,” she added.

“It's more fun to imagine that, so I'm good.”

“Wow. Creepy.”

He'd been joking, but she seemed legitimately grossed out.

“So what is this weird thing?”

“What am I to you?”

“Just a cheeky kohai,” she said. Without even a moment’s thought. She also made sure to emphasize the *just* part so he’d be sure to notice.

“...Oh. Then what do you think you are to me?”

“A one-sided crush. A great beauty, always ready with a kind word—the kind of senpai everyone admires.”

“Got it in one,” he said, lifting a piece of egg roll to his mouth. He chewed for a while.

It was a truly tragic state of affairs, but his relationship with Mai had definitely reverted back to the way it was. Even though she’d agreed to go out with him the day before.

They should be a couple now! Being demoted to a cheeky kohai was just depressing.

But if this baffling phenomenon was going to ruin his relationship, he just had to fight against it. Get Mai to agree to date him once again.

He couldn’t let this get him down. Giving up was not an option.

“So why the weird question?” she asked, frowning.

“I wanted to be clear on our current status before I proceed.”

This was an evasion, but he felt it was a convincing one. It wasn’t a lie. He genuinely had been after more information on his current predicament.

“That sounds suspicious.”

Mai’s eyes narrowed, and she gave him a searching look.

“More importantly, Mai...”

“Don’t change the subject.”

Sakuta pressed on as if he hadn’t heard her. “I love you. Will you go out with me?”

He looked her right in the eye.

“I said, don’t change the subject.”

“I really would prefer you not ignore something this important.”

“I’ve heard it all before,” she droned, sounding utterly bored.

“Oh...rejection? Then I’ll just have to search elsewhere for love.”

“Wha...?”

“Thank you for everything.”

He bowed his head and gave a heartbroken sigh.

“I—I didn’t say no! Why are you giving up?” Mai demanded, giving him a reproachful glare.

“Then is it a yes?”

“Urgh...you’ve got a lot of nerve.”

“Is that a yes?”

He stuck to his guns. One last push.

“.....Mm,” she intoned, nodding, her voice barely above a whisper. “It’s a yes.”

As if trying to cover her embarrassment, Mai quickly started eating an egg roll. This was adorable. A thrill ran through him.

“Mai!”

“Wh-what?”

“Can I hug you?”

“Why?”

She looked up at him guardedly.

“You were so cute just now.”

“Then no. Definitely no.”

“Aww.”

“I feel like it wouldn’t end with a hug. Nobody in their right mind would say yes to *that*!”

Mai spent the rest of the meal grumbling.

When the warning bell rang, their lunch date ended, and Sakuta and Mai headed to their respective classrooms.

On the way, he saw a familiar figure on the staircase landing. She had a very modern, soft short bob. Light makeup on her cheeks, just a little color—enough to soften her entire expression.

Tomoe Koga.

She was a year below him—his kohai—and a month ago she'd mistaken him for a kidnapper. It was certainly a memorable first encounter, so he'd retained her name. Sakuta had been trying to help a lost little girl find her mother. An act of pure, unvarnished kindness. And Tomoe'd kicked him in the tailbone, yelling, "Die, pedo creep!"

Yet that same Tomoe was now meekly hanging her head. When Sakuta looked closer, he saw she was with someone. A tall male student. He was well built—probably an athlete. Brown hair, heels crushing the backs of his slippers. Based on the wear and tear on his uniform, he was probably a third-year. Pretty good-looking.

"Maesawa...wh-what's this about?" Tomoe asked. She looked nervous.

Maesawa must've been the guy's name.

"So, uh...would you like to go out with me?"

"Huh?!"

"Is that a no?"

"W-well...er, um...can I think about it?" Tomoe sounded pretty desperate.

"Sure thing. When you're ready!" Maesawa said breezily. He went off up the stairs.

Not wanting to look like he'd been eavesdropping, Sakuta kept walking down the hall.

"I knew she was popular... She is awfully cute."

Normally, he'd have been cursing her name, but today he felt more like celebrating everyone's good fortune. After all, he'd finally gotten Mai to say

yes.

“Now...I just need tomorrow to come.”

This was Sakuta’s greatest concern.

Unable to bear the idea of repeating the day again, Sakuta acted on a hunch...

...and stayed up all night.

Since he’d woken up to find it was yesterday, what would happen if he didn’t sleep? It was better to avoid sleep until tomorrow came.

Shortly after two, Sakuta stifled a yawn and flipped on the TV to kill time. There was a soccer match on-screen. Dark-blue uniforms. Samurai blue. This was the Japan team playing. Group A.

“Seriously? Two days in a row?”

Even on a tight schedule, they usually got three days off between games.

“Mm?”

Something was bugging him.

As the match played out, Sakuta caught on.

“I’ve seen this before...”

It was almost the end of the first half. Number ten was in the center of the field, got a pass from a teammate, and dribbled rapidly up into the opponent’s territory. He dodged past two defenders, and another hit him from behind. Whistles blew. Japan got a free kick from just outside the penalty area.

The same things he’d seen in the highlight reel on the morning news. But this time, the top corner of the screen said **LIVE**. What he was seeing was a satellite broadcast. The match was happening right this moment on the other side of the world.

“...Right, ha-ha, good joke.”

He ran back to his room and checked the clock. 2:10 AM. And next to that...
June 27.

“.....”

Sakuta had assumed it was the next day by now...but it was yesterday again.

Back in the living room, he watched the broadcast play out. The ref's whistle blew, and player number four ran up to the ball.

The ball hit the net...or, no, the powerful shot bounced off the crossbar. A tall defender from the opposing team cleared it away, and Japan failed to score a point.

"Huh? What?"

This was not the outcome he'd expected. He remembered a conversation he'd had with his friend Rio Futaba.

"So, like, when the Japan team has a soccer match and all I see is the final score on the news, they win, but if I actually watch the match, they always lose?"

"For the sake of the Japan team, you'd better not watch any more soccer. Seriously, never again."

He was pretty sure that had been part of a conversation about how observation can affect an outcome.

"No way. This can't be true..."

Sakuta watching couldn't have actually caused the Japan team to lose.

Almost praying, Sakuta cheered the Japan team on until the game ended. But they never made up the one point scored against them in the first half, and the final result was a 1–0 loss.

The sportscasters recapped a few moments when the tables could have turned but finally concluded by pointing out the all-too-familiar Japan team weakness—an inability to come through when it really mattered.

If they were to make it out of the group stage, Japan absolutely had to win the next game. The commentator made it very clear how dire this was.

"Tomorrow..." Sakuta said. "No, today...or, I guess, yesterday? I've really got to talk to Futaba."

For now, he sat alone in the living room at night, clutching his head.

Now that he knew staying up was pointless, Sakuta went to bed, and the next morning, unable to completely give up, he switched on the TV. But the news was all about Japan's tragic loss.

"Is this really my fault?"

As if trying to escape the guilt, Sakuta left the house thirty minutes early.

The extra half hour alone made everything look different. The air seemed a bit fresher, the flow of people into Fujisawa Station slightly different. It felt like there were more business people. At his normal time, there were more students in uniform.

This impression was even stronger on the Enoden—there were far fewer passengers in general.

And the road from Shichirigahama Station to school was, naturally, almost empty. Only a handful of students besides Sakuta. Closer to the start of classes, this road would be absolutely packed with Minegahara students.

It felt like he was somewhere else entirely.

He changed into his slippers in the deserted entrance hall. With no one else here, the very air felt different. It was so quiet. Even tranquil.

Acutely conscious of this difference, Sakuta walked right past the stairs and to the science lab.

"Futaba, you here?" he called, opening the door.

The person he was after was by the blackboard. A smaller female student wearing a white lab coat over her uniform. One of Sakuta's two friends—Rio Futaba.

Without so much as a glance in his direction, she let out an exasperated sigh.

Ignoring this, he sat down at the desk opposite her.

Between them was a slice of toast resting on a beaker and a cup of coffee with steam rising from it. The toast was nicely browned. This must've been breakfast.

With Rio as its only member, the Science Club did whatever they wanted.

She picked the toast up in both hands and took a bite. It smelled good.

“So.”

“Don’t.”

“I haven’t said anything yet.”

“If you’re here at this hour, it must be trouble.”

Smart. No, probably anyone could have figured that much out.

“I’m here to report a fascinating phenomenon.”

“That’s what I meant by *trouble*.”

Rio tried to brush him off.

Not giving him the time of day.

“Go away!”

She grumpily took another bite of toast crust.

Rio was usually pretty placid, but she definitely seemed on edge today. She must have woken up on the wrong side of the bed.

“What’s up with you, then?” Sakuta asked.

“Why?” Rio finally met his gaze. Through the rims of her glasses, he could see her guard was up.

“You’re in a bad mood.”

“I’m not...,” she started, then gave up hiding it and just settled for a long sigh. Rio turned to the windows, admiring the view, and, as if talking to herself, said, “Well, rather than fret over it alone, I’m better off telling you and laughing it off.”

“Yeah?” Sakuta said. He couldn’t tell if this was a positive development or not.

“I was on the train with Kunimi this morning. He was headed to morning practice.”

“Was he harassing you?”

Sakuta's eyes went right to Rio's chest.

"Kunimi would never do that."

"That look in your eyes says you think I would! I'm appalled."

"Then don't stare."

Rio turned, as if hiding her chest. She clearly didn't appreciate his attention, so Sakuta decided to do his best not to look again.

"So? What happened with him?"

"Nothing, really," Rio said with a self-deprecating smile. "Just hated myself for being happy a boy spoke to me even though I know he has a girlfriend."

"What a very girlish concern."

"If you spoke to me on the train, I would visibly shudder."

"Was that really necessary?"

He was sure it wasn't. But if lashing out at him helped her mood improve, he could take it.

"I feel like I'm in a downward spiral," she said. She polished off the last of the toast, took a sip of coffee, and sighed again.

"Maybe you should just tell him?"

"Tell him what?"

She knew full well what he meant.

"That you love him?"

"...Love who?"

She definitely hesitated that time, afraid he'd say the name aloud if she kept denying it.

"Obviously Kunimi."

"Look, Azusagawa..."

"Just tell him how you feel."

Sakuta looked her in the eye, not letting her get away.

“.....”

Rio met his gaze, pursing her lips. She sat down on her chair, knees up, facing sideways.

“I don’t want good advice today,” she said sullenly.

“I’m sorry.”

“You’d better be.”

“But are you just gonna stay like this? If you’re in a downward spiral, maybe it would be better to get it out there.”

He knew the only reason she was doing Science Club stuff this early was because she might run into Yuuma on his way to morning practice. But when she did run into him, this happened.

“Like I said, I don’t want good advice.”

She sighed yet again. Like she was letting the air out of a balloon. Her profile was a portrait of gloom.

“Saying anything would just worry Kunimi.”

“Every charming guy deserves a worry or two.”

“If only I was as tactless as you.”

“Such praise! I’m blushing.”

“You’ve proved my point.”

“Men love being yanked around by women.”

“That’s exclusive to rascals like you, Azusagawa.”

“Kunimi’s girlfriend is pretty good at it herself.”

His girlfriend had once told Sakuta that he didn’t fit into the class and she felt sorry for Yuuma every time she saw them together. Given the abuse she was heaping on him, Sakuta felt he was far more deserving of pity than Kunimi. This girlfriend’s name was Saki Kamisato. She was in the same class as Sakuta, 2-1. She wasn’t Sakuta’s type, but she was quite popular with the boys; everyone agreed she was cute. She was a central figure in the flashiest, most attention-

grabbing group in class.

The polar opposite of Rio, standing alone in a science lab, doing experiments.

“Azusagawa.”

“What?”

“Bringing her up is tactless even for you.”

“I figured this called for drastic measures. If you don’t like it, go get shot down!”

“I hate it when you’re right.”

Rio was fully aware that was the one way to get closure. She knew it but couldn’t bring herself to do it. Because that would be the end.

“I’m the only person who dares tell you the brutal truth.”

“And admitting *that* is proof you’re an awful person.”

Rio laughed. She seemed to have cheered up a bit.

“So what’s your problem?” she asked.

“Tomorrow won’t come,” he said, going for the straight pitch.

“What does it matter? You never had a bright future.”

Her reply was just mean.

“It’s a big deal! I have a rosy tomorrow waiting for me!”

He started dating Mai at lunch today. Calling that a rosy future was not at all exaggerated.

“Problem is, today is yesterday, and yesterday was today.”

“Rephrase so a human can understand.”

“I *am* human!”

“I thought you were a rascal?”

“Look... Argh, never mind. Fine. Um...”

Deciding to pick his battles, Sakuta gave Rio a rundown on the strange things happening to him.

Five minutes later, having heard him out, Rio just yawned sleepily.

“So? What do you think, Futaba?”

He looked at her grimly.

“Azusagawa...you’re a delusional middle schooler.”

“I’m seventeen.”

“Then you’re a delusional high schooler.”

“So you give up.”

Rio certainly didn’t seem like she could be bothered. She’d made another cup of coffee and sat there drinking it.

“Only other option is your beloved Adolescence Syndrome.”

She seemed equally unconcerned about that.

“I really *don’t* love it,” he grumbled.

Adolescence Syndrome.

A collective term for strange phenomena that were a hot topic online. “I can read people’s minds” or “I can read object’s memories,” et cetera. A bunch of eyebrow-raising stories about supernatural events.

Nobody seriously believed them.

But Sakuta had encountered several of these phenomena before. This was likely another. He certainly couldn’t think of any other explanation.

“So please do something?”

“You’ll have to solve this one yourself.”

“Can I ask why?”

“By the looks of it, neither I, the other students, nor the seven billion people on Earth seem to be aware that this is the third today.”

Rio was watching the baseball team doing laps of the schoolyard. Nobody would commit so hard to working up a sweat if this was their third time through the day. They’d have much more urgent business to attend to than morning practice.

“They’d be in a panic if they were,” Rio said. She was fiddling with her phone, and she showed Sakuta the search results. She’d searched for “June 27,” “Third time,” and “Repeat.” None of the results looked related. “Which leads me to the conclusion that *you’re* causing this Adolescence Syndrome,” Rio announced.

A horrible thought.

“I have neither the mental instability associated with Adolescence Syndrome nor am I under an unusual amount of stress.”

Online speculation blamed those things for Adolescence Syndrome. The most popular theory held that these were delusions caused by the stress of reality not working out as planned. They were a means of escaping that reality.

“Well, you may not be aware of it.” Rio seemed pretty sure Sakuta was to blame. “But whatever the cause, allow me to offer an interpretation of events different from your own.”

“Different how?”

“From what you said, Azusagawa, you believe you’re trapped in a time loop.”

“It sure feels like it.”

That sort of thing happened all the time in sci-fi novels.

“I’d recommend not getting stuck on that idea.”

“Why not?”

“Returning to the past is really problematic.”

She didn’t say *impossible*, so there had to be a theory on it somewhere.

“The June twenty-seventh you’ve been experiencing may be a vision of the future seen from your previous moment in time.”

That sounded pretty batshit in its own right.

He found it hard to believe she was the same person who’d just pointed out how difficult traveling into the past could be.

“You’re making it sound like foresight is simple.”

“It’s closer to being possible than temporarily traveling into the past.”

“Really?”

“However, we’re speaking of classical physics, before the introduction of quantum mechanics.”

“Hoo boy.”

“Have you heard of Laplace’s demon?”

“Never met *any* demons.”

“So that’s a no, then. All matter in the universe is equally under the same scientific laws. Got that?”

“Sure. Basic physics, right?”

“Yes. And if we turn those laws into formulas and do the math, they’ll show us the conditions that lie in the future.”

This sounded extremely simple. Sakuta crooked his head, unable to see where she was going with this.

“What’s your point?”

“Specifically, for every atom in the world, if we know the location and momentum—the product of the mass and velocity—then classical-physics equations will allow us to accurately calculate the future conditions. This is well within the range of the subject covered in high school.”

It was a real tragedy, but despite being in high school himself, Sakuta had no clue what Rio was talking about. He had a lot of questions.

“All atoms is a *lot*.”

Basically infinite, right?

“Yes.”

“Is it actually possible to determine the location and momentum of all of them?”

It was hard enough figuring out how many grains of rice were in a single *onigiri*.

“At the least, physicists at the time—we’re talking nineteenth century—

couldn't do it. Even if they had somehow learned the positions and momentum of everything, calculating the equations for that quantity of data would have taken a considerable amount of time. If doing the math on the world one second in the future takes more than one second, you can never actually get ahead."

"I get that."

It was probably impossible even for modern computers.

"So a physicist named Laplace thought up an imaginary being that could actually pull off this impossible feat."

"And that's Laplace's demon?"

Rio nodded slowly.

"This demon has the capacity to instantaneously know the positions and momentum of every atom in the world and can use those numbers to instantly calculate the future. In other words, Laplace's demon knows everything that will happen."

"Hmm."

"You don't seem convinced."

"Well, even if it can calculate the future, that doesn't account for our free will, does it? Does that really count as knowing the future?"

"Ah, that old chestnut."

"There's no way it can predict emotions."

"It can," Rio said firmly.

"Huh?" Sakuta blinked vacantly at her.

"Human bodies are made of atoms. If you can grasp the positions and momentum of those, you can calculate the choices the brain will make and the emotions it will produce."

"I see...but I wish I hadn't heard that."

"You'll think otherwise once I finish."

“Really? I mean, from what you just said, if emotional aspects are already part of it, then if you know the positions and momentum of all the atoms at any single given moment, you can calculate everything in the future forever.”

“Exactly.”

“So doesn’t that mean there’s only one set future?”

If you had the data for the initial position and momentum, then you just had to change the variable for the passage of time, and the other numbers would always work out the same way. No matter where you were in time, destiny was set in stone, its course determined by math and physics.

“You worked that out, Azusagawa? Aren’t you clever,” Rio cooed, like she was praising a small child. “You’re right...based on what we’ve discussed so far.”

“Then, wait... Whether I study before a test or not doesn’t matter, since the results of the final exams next week are already set in stone?”

“That’s not quite right. Your results are set in stone. But you assume the part where you choose whether to study or not isn’t. In actual fact, what choice you make is *also* already set in stone.”

“Mm. Oh. Right.”

That’s what it meant to have the entire future already determined.

“After hearing what I said, you thought, ‘If the future’s already set, there’s no point in working hard.’ Right?”

“So you mean Laplace’s demon already knew how I would respond to your lecture?”

“Exactly.”

This was complicated, but he thought he was following it.

But that meant...

“Our fates are already sealed.”

Grim.

“Did you forget what I said earlier?”

“You were super happy when Kunimi spoke to you this morning?”

“Drop dead.”

“Uh...the part about this being before the introduction of quantum mechanics?”

“If you remember, don’t be a dick.”

Rio gave him a sulky glare. She was normally so dispassionate, it was weird seeing her pull such a childish face.

“I explained Schrödinger’s cat to you before, right?”

“Where we can’t tell if the cat’s alive or dead before the box is opened?”

This had happened when he was talking to Rio a month ago about how to handle the Adolescence Syndrome symptoms Mai was experiencing.

“I’m impressed you remember that much.”

“Feel free to lavish praise upon me.”

Rio ignored him.

“In the world of quantum physics, the position of particles only exists in terms of probability. I explained that, if you remember?”

“It sounds familiar. The only way to determine the exact positions is through observation, was it?”

“Yes. Since that observation is key, you have to shine a light on them so they can be seen.”

Rio pulled a flashlight out of a drawer and aimed it at a baseball she set on the desk.

“Now we know where the particle is?”

“Yes. But particles are extremely small, so if you turn a light of the same size on them, that will change the particles’ speed and direction.”

Rio made the ball roll. It fell off the desk, bounced twice, hit a chair leg, and stopped.

“In other words, determining the particles’ positions changes the speed. To

accurately determine a particle's momentum—which includes its velocity—its position turns into a probable range. There's no way to know both values at the same time."

"Sounds frustrating."

"Fortunately, quantum mechanics has banished Laplace's demon and proved that the future is not set in stone. Isn't that a relief?"

Honestly, not really. Sakuta still didn't really get quantum stuff. And if he didn't understand it, it was hard to find it comforting.

"But quantum mechanics is all from the point of view of humans, right?"

"Of course."

"Then..."

Rio jumped ahead of him.

"I know what you're thinking, Azusagawa. If Laplace's demon was always a being beyond human capacity, perhaps it could accurately measure both position and momentum at the same time."

She glanced at him to see if she was on the right track.

"Yeah, that's what I was about to say."

"Well, it's up to you how powerful this demon is," Rio advised, as if this had been her entire point.

So Rio was saying that Sakuta himself was Laplace's demon.

"Sorry, but I'm not any kind of demon."

"Be careful no one dissects you."

"I'll be fine as long as you don't report me to any sinister laboratories."

"We may not see each other again." Rio glanced down at her phone. "If you're sure it isn't you, then you'll have to find the real Laplace's demon."

"Where would I find it?"

Classes hadn't covered how to locate demons.

"Like yourself, the demon will remember that they're repeating June twenty-

seventh. And if they have those memories, there's a good chance they're behaving differently than on the previous June twenty-seventh. I'd imagine."

"Ohhh...I see."

Rio had a point. Anyone who knew what was going on would try to do something about it. They were likely acting to change the outcome. Or at least were extremely rattled by the whole situation.

But he currently had no leads. Where would he even begin?

Before he could ask, the warning bell rang. Morning homeroom started in five minutes. It would be stupid to be tardy after getting to school this early.

He slung his bag over his shoulder and stood up. He tried to help Rio clean up, but she just said, "Go on."

"Okay. Then...thanks!"

As he was about to leave the science lab, an idea hit him. He stopped at the door.

"Oh, right...Futaba."

"What?"

"If I repeat today again, should I try to stop you from meeting Kunimi this morning?"

If he did, maybe she wouldn't start the day looking so depressed.

"....."

Rio thought for a second. Then...

"Mind your own business," she said with a smile. "For now, I want to handle this mess on my own."

"If it ever gets too much for you, just say the word."

"Yeah. You owe me a lot, so I'll make you pay it back eventually."

"I'll pay it back with interest."

With one last glance back at her sardonic grin, Sakuta left the lab.

Find the real Laplace's demon.

Rio had given him a goal, but where could he start?

He had no idea who the demon could be, and there was no guarantee it was anyone close to him. Worst-case scenario, it might even be someone on the other side of the world.

“And if that’s true, I’m doomed.”

A high school student didn’t have the funds to travel that far. He didn’t even own a passport. His prospects were grim. No—he didn’t even *have* prospects.

He was depressed already.

But at lunch, he left his class and headed for the third floor. He’d promised to eat with Mai in the empty classroom.

His relationship with Mai was the single thing Sakuta cared about most. But it was being wiped out with each reset. Once again, he was going to eat her homemade lunch and ask her out. The only saving grace was that he thoroughly enjoyed doing so.

Looking forward to it, he opened the door to the empty classroom.

Or...not so empty. There was a sound from the back. Turning toward it, he saw a skirt-covered butt sticking out from behind the podium. Whoever it was seemed to think she was totally hidden.

“.....”

There was definitely something wrong here.

Nothing like this had happened the first or second time through June 27. He’d come straight here when lunch started and waited for Mai to arrive, and then the two of them had passed the time happily. That was all. Nobody else interrupted, and Sakuta had encountered nobody in this room but Mai.

Which meant this was a new development. One that had not occurred the first two times. A chance encounter with someone making different choices.

Something Rio had said that morning ran through his mind.

“Like yourself, the demon will remember that they’re repeating June twenty-seventh. And if they have those memories, there’s a good chance they’re behaving differently than on the previous June twenty-seventh, I’d imagine.”

And what he was seeing sure seemed to match up.

“I’ve got you now, Laplace’s demon!” Sakuta cried.

The girl behind the podium slowly poked her head out, like a rodent emerging from its den.

Sakuta recognized her.

A very modern short bob. Big round eyes. Soft, cute makeup. A very schoolgirly schoolgirl look, everything just so, the spitting image of today’s “high school girl.”

One hand held a cell phone with a cover the color of pollack roe. “Oh,” she said.

It was the first-year student Tomoe Koga.

She was shorter than most girls her age. Everything tiny. Hardly threatening enough to call a demon. Maybe a mini-demon. Or a petite devil.

A gust of sea breeze came through the window, moving her hair and the hem of her skirt. She broke the silence first.

“Ichirou Satou.”

“That is but a false name to fool the eyes of the world.”

He was surprised she still remembered the fake name he’d given her when they first met. Sakuta was pretty bad at remembering names, but Tomoe seemed to have acquired that skill somewhere.

“Azusagawa, right?” she asked, seemingly less sure.

“Sakuta Azusagawa. Second-year.”

“Tomoe Koga. First-year...”

She hesitated, then elected to introduce herself formally. This felt out of character.

“No need to be so stiff,” Sakuta said. “We’ve kicked each other’s butts, after all.”

“Forget that ever happened!” she yelled. That was more like his first impression of her.

She was clutching her butt with both hands, as if remembering the pain. This made him feel like he was being a bit *too* mean.

“Koga, no point beating around the bush.”

“What?”

“How many times have you been through today?”

“?!” Her eyes went wide. Then, the shock gave way to anxiety, and they wavered.

“This is my third,” he said.

Tomoe nodded once, then said, “Mine, too.” She held up three fingers.

But then her face crumpled as if she was about to cry.

Before Sakuta had time to be surprised, she wailed, “I wasn’t the only one!”

Tears rolling down her cheeks, she collapsed to the floor, overcome with relief.

“What *is* this?!” she demanded.

“No clue.”

“Why are we repeating the same day?!”

“I dunno.”

“Why don’t you know?!”

“Can’t know what I don’t.”

Her relief was already reverting to anxiety.

“I thought I was saved! Give me back my tears!”

“Drink some tap water, and you’ll restore those lost fluids.”

“So what now?”

That's what Sakuta wanted to know.

"So whuut naaaow?" Tomoe repeated, her natural accent coming out.

It seemed like she had absolutely no idea she was causing this situation.

"Why are you so calm?!" Tomoe yelled, grabbing his shirt and shaking him.

"Will panicking help?"

"No, but it's natural!"

"Ah-ha."

"Argh, I know you're too crazy for that! You're the nutbar who asked someone out with the whole school watching!"

"I think calling someone a nutbar to his face is plenty crazy."

"Shut up."

"Might as well ask, but...you have an idea why this is happening?"

"Not a whit."

"A what?"

"N-not at all!"

"You're no help."

"Neither are you!"

"Nothing bad happened to you? Nothing you're upset about?"

"Why should I have to tell you? Oh, a text."

Tomoe's attention shifted to her screen.

"I'm pretty sure this is Adolescence Syndrome," Sakuta said. "If this phenomenon is caused by your adolescent mental instability, then we need to identify and eliminate the source of that instability."

"Adolescence Syndrome? Are you insane?" She jeered, not even looking up from her phone. She was busy typing a reply. "That's just online gossip. Nobody believes that."

Sakuta only bought into it because these unbelievable things had happened

to him before.

His sister, Kaede, had been the first. He'd witnessed firsthand how seeing heartless messages and posts from classmates had given her bruises like she'd been punched and lacerations like she'd had a knife swung at her.

Then, a month ago, people around Mai started losing the ability to perceive her and began forgetting she existed at all.

And this situation was definitely in the same wheelhouse.

"I know how you feel, but after repeating the same day three times, I'd think Adolescence Syndrome would start to sound pretty convincing."

"Urp...good point..."

There was a limit to how successfully you could convince yourself it was all a dream. And finding someone else in the same predicament made it all that much more real. Rio had said they might just be seeing a vision of the future, but no matter how he looked at it, this felt like the real world.

"Could you not do that while we talk?" he insisted, grabbing the phone out of her hand.

"Hey! Give that back!"

He held it up high. She was too short to reach. She jumped a few times trying to retrieve it but couldn't quite manage it.

"I won't text while we talk."

A sign of remorse. He returned the phone.

"Here."

She pounced on the device like a wild thing. And was instantly back to silently tapping the screen.

"....."

"....."

"So you've abandoned the talking part."

"You're distracting me. I need silence."

“Schoolgirls these days sure are something.”

Sakuta was forced to wait for twenty full seconds.

“So what were you saying?” Tomoe asked, finally looking up.

“Anything bad happen? Anything worrying you? I’m looking for any hint on how to get out of June twenty-seventh.”

“.....Um...” Tomoe frowned, thinking really hard.

For a good ten seconds.

“I’ve put on a few pounds?” she suggested, flushing slightly.

She sounded like she meant it.

“.....”

Tomoe was as skinny as she was short. Everything about her was slender.

“Wh-what’s with that look?”

“Don’t worry, Koga. You’re totally thin. No problems there. And hey, a few extra pounds might actually improve your flat-chest problem.”

“It all goes to my butt and belly.” She sighed.

Now that she mentioned it, her hips and backside did seem...sturdy.

“I’ve heard they get bigger if you squeeze them.”

“I tried that already!” Tomoe snapped, giving them another squeeze despite Sakuta’s watchful gaze.

“Then best to give up. Boys don’t fall for girls based on boob size anyway. But is there anything *else* worrying you? Something a little less ‘typical teenager.’”

“Swim classes are about to start! It’s a pressing concern! If I’ve got no boobs and don’t tuck in at the waist, summers are hell on—”

Tomoe suddenly broke off, her eyes going wide.

“Ah!”

She was looking at the hall behind him.

“H-hide!” she hissed, grabbing his arm and dragging him behind the podium.

“Why?”

“Just do it!”

Tomoe pushed Sakuta behind the narrow podium, then hid behind it herself. This required him to basically lie flat while she straddled him.

Was this a popular pastime with the first-years? Sakuta didn't get the youth of today.

Confused, he turned his attention outside and saw a male student through the crack in the door. The third-year who'd asked Tomoe out on the previous June 27. Tomoe had called him Maesawa.

“Keep your head down!” Tomoe grabbed Sakuta's face, pulling it below the podium.

“Isn't he looking for you?”

“I think so, but... I sent him a message saying I might be busy at lunch.”

“Really? You don't look busy.”

“I said ‘might’!”

In other words, she was lying to Maesawa.

“You're not making sense. Just go get asked out.”

“How do you know about that?”

“Saw it last time.”

Her face was inches from his. Glossy pink lips. Her breath tickling his cheeks. He adjusted his position, careful not to bump anything he shouldn't...

“Eek!”

But Tomoe jumped anyway. Sakuta was afraid he'd touched her somewhere sensitive, but that wasn't the cause. The phone in her hand had vibrated. The light of the screen on her face, she started tapping out a reply.

“Is this some new fetish?”

“.....”

Tomoe was too focused on her phone to respond.

While he waited for her to finish, he happened to look down and see her skirt riding up. There was a scrap of white cloth visible where her right leg met her body.

“Uh, Koga.”

“Later.”

“I can see your panties.”

“Don’t have time for that right now.”

Sakuta’s admission was summarily dismissed.

“I will never understand high school girls.”

Apparently, sending someone a text was far more important than her own modesty. Sakuta had no choice. He fixed her skirt for her. Now all he could see was thigh.

While he was busy with that, Tomoe sent her text.

“So why hide?” he asked.

And why was he hiding with her?

“Well...Rena has a thing for Maesawa,” Tomoe whispered, as if that cleared everything up.

“Huh?” Sakuta said. This was clear as mud.

“Huh?” she echoed, somehow even more baffled than he was. “What don’t you get?”

“You haven’t actually explained anything.”

“Then, uh... So, I go with Rena to watch basketball practice a lot.”

“Who is Rena?”

Not exactly a nationally famous actress.

“A friend from class. Rena Kashiba. She always talks about how cool Maesawa is...and I was just tagging along.”

The rest seemed to stick in Tomoe’s mouth.

“But this Maesawa got interested in you instead?”

“...B-basically.” She nodded.

“And you like him, too?”

“Nah...I don’t really go for chick magnets.”

“Then just say no when he asks you out.”

Why bother hiding? Just calmly reject him. He seemed like the kinda hunk who starts a band right before the cultural festival—he deserved to be rejected on general principle.

“If I did that, I’d be an instant outcast! He’s the guy Rena—my friend—likes!”

“Huh? I don’t get it. If you’re not dating him...”

“Being asked out at *all* is a problem!”

“I’m so lost.”

“I promised Rena I had her back! But if I get asked out...I’m not reading the air!”

Tomoe’s voice grew grim.

“What should I do...?”

She was turning pale. This was clearly a huge crisis for her. At least, Tomoe genuinely believed it was.

“You didn’t seduce him, right?”

“Of course not!”

“Shh, he’ll hear you.”

Tomoe clapped both hands over her mouth.

“A-anyway, that’s my problem. Got it?”

He understood the words, at least. The value system behind them, not at all.

“Not a whit.”

“Argh, I need a translator!”

Tomoe was so frustrated, she tried leaping to her feet, but they were under

the podium, and overhead...

“Ah! Wait!” Sakuta cried. Too late.

Tomoe hit her head, hard. So hard the podium lifted up...and toppled over.

She tried to grab it, but her hands caught only air. The podium hit the ground with a huge crash.

And Tomoe herself tripped over Sakuta, losing her balance.

“Eek!”

With a shriek, she fell toward him. Reflexively, Sakuta threw his arms around her, catching her. She was really light. Definitely didn’t seem like she needed to worry about extra pounds.

“Geez...”

He’d been planning on trying to calm her down but didn’t get a chance. Midword, a figure appeared out of the corner of his eye.

A male student was standing in the door, staring at him. The third-year in question—Maesawa, from the basketball team.

Maesawa looked like he didn’t know what to think. This was definitely awkward. From his point of view, Sakuta and Tomoe were lying on the floor of the classroom, embracing.



“So this is what you were busy with?” he asked. “You’ve got lousy taste in men.”

Clearly, he’d jumped to all the wrong conclusions. And was very rude.

“No, this isn’t...” Sakuta tried to set him right, but before he could, the other door slammed open.

Sakuta’s heart leaped out of his chest.

An involuntary wave of panic. All his instincts screaming danger.

Sakuta knew who it was before he even saw her. He was painfully aware.

He slowly turned his eyes toward the back door.

Yep. It was Mai.

She had a paper bag in one hand. The lunch she’d hand-made for him. He could recite the entire menu by heart. Fried chicken. Egg rolls. *Hijiki* seaweed and soybeans. Potato salad and cherry tomatoes.

He knew all about it, but the moment their eyes met, Sakuta knew he wouldn’t be eating a single bite of it today.

Mai stood motionless in the doorway, staring frostily down at him. Sakuta’s arms were still around Tomoe, a fact that seemed to distance Mai beyond measure.

“This is all a misunderstanding,” Sakuta said, calmly relaying the facts. A crisis was the ultimate test of a human’s true nature. His only choice was to remain calm and explain his innocence in measured tones.

“.....”

He looked Mai right in the eye, swearing he wasn’t guilty.

“.....”

But Mai wordlessly turned around.

“Augh! Wait, Maiiii!”

He shoved Tomoe off and bounded to his feet. Tomoe rolled over, hit her head on a desk, and yelped, “Ow!” but Sakuta ignored this.

“Allow me to explain!”

“Don’t speak to me. The pedo might be catching.”

And with that, Mai walked away.

“Yiiikes...she’s *really* mad.”

That was definitely not a “let’s eat lunch together” vibe. Even if he did ask her out, he didn’t think he was going to pry a yes out of her now.

“Sigh...”

Sighing was his only option.

He looked at the other door, and Maesawa had vanished, too.

Tomoe was still lying on the floor, so he helped her up.

“Th-thanks...”

Sakuta put his hand on her head and messed up her hair as hard as he could.

“Augh! Stop!”

Tomoe quickly pulled away. She fixed her hair with both hands, then glared at him balefully.

“I have to wake up at six to get this right!”

Fashionable schoolgirls had long mornings.

Sakuta ignored her.

He took a deep breath.

Panic would get him nowhere. What had happened, happened.

His only option was to accept the situation and search for a solution.

“All right. Most likely tomorrow will be today again anyway.”

Tomoe was clearly Laplace’s demon, but he still only had a tenuous grasp on the situation and not even a glimpse of a potential solution. As far as Mai was concerned, he just had to do a better job tomorrow—on his fourth June 27. All he had to do was avoid accidentally hugging Tomoe.

This seemed like the ideal solution.

But the following morning, Sakuta would bitterly regret that assumption...



Do the winds of tomorrow
blow tomorrow?

1

The next morning found Sakuta standing in the living room, stunned.

While he waited for his toast to pop up, he'd turned on the TV. Seconds later...

He'd assumed it would be the results of the Japan soccer match, but instead, it was a charming story about someone finding a bundle of bills worth ten million yen in their garden.

"Good morning. Today is Saturday, June twenty-eighth. We have a surprising lead story for you today!"

The regular morning newscaster. A man in his early forties. Calm, smooth voice. Even Sakuta couldn't object. He made everything easy to follow.

But as natural as his delivery was, today Sakuta's mind just refused to process it.

"...D-did he just say June twenty-eighth?"

"He did!"

Kaede was standing next to him in her panda pajamas. She frowned up at him, baffled.

"He said Saturday?"

"He did."

"....."

"What about it?"

"Kaede, pinch my cheek."

"Don't mind if I do!" Kaede reached up and gave him a good twist.

"That hurts."

"S-sorry."

"No, it's fine."

It wasn't fine at all. If this wasn't a dream, then it was really happening. If it hurt, this was probably real.

Which meant there was no point thinking about it. June 28 had really come. And not just any June 28. He was supposed to have gotten Mai to say yes. They were supposed to be officially dating. But that whole thing had gone right out the window. Mai had gotten the wrong idea and stormed out. Leaving him on the worst possible version of June 28.

"This isn't funny..."

It was like being dropped from heaven straight to hell.

Sakuta staggered over to the phone and lifted the receiver.

"What's wrong?" Kaede asked.

"Nothing," he muttered as he dialed a friend's cell phone number.

She answered on the third ring.

"This is Azusagawa."

"Why this early on a Saturday?" Rio asked. From her voice, she was clearly already up.

"Make me a time machine," he demanded, getting right to the point.

"....."

Without her saying another word, the call ended.

Bad connection? Cell phones did drop calls sometimes.

He quickly redialed.

"....."

It rang a bunch of times, but she didn't pick up.

Apparently, she'd intentionally hung up on him.

He grimly hung in there, and she finally answered on the tenth ring.

"If you say anything else stupid, I *will* hang up again."

"I am absolutely serious here."

“I’m busy changing!”

“Be more specific.”

“All that’s left are socks.”

“You dress in a very unusual order.”

“Not really.”

“I start with socks!”

“That’s unusual.”

“Hardly.”

“So what is it?”

“You remember what we talked about yesterday? How I was repeating the same day?”

“Congrats! You’ve escaped yesterday.”

“In the worst way.”

“You found Laplace’s demon, then?”

“I did, but...I think she’s a first-year at Minegahara.”

Loath as he was to admit it, his only choice was to accept the reality and proceed from here. At the very least, he had to think about *why* he was able to escape yesterday.

He couldn’t bear getting stuck in the same day again.

There were three main differences between the third loop and the first two.

The first was obviously that Sakuta and Mai were no longer going out. Horrible misunderstandings had left her in no mood for that.

The second was also romance related; Tomoe Koga had no longer been asked out by Maesawa.

And the third was the result of the Japan soccer game. They’d won the first two times but lost the third. Sakuta really hoped that wasn’t because he’d watched the match live, but he felt responsible anyway.

If you looked for Laplace's demon based on those conditions, there was only one possible conclusion.

Tomoe Koga was the demon.

When he told Rio this, she inquired, "Why do you think that?"

"The culprit is always the one who benefits most."

And she was the only other person looping June 27.

"That makes sense," Rio admitted.

Sakuta and the Japan team may have had horrible outcomes, but Tomoe came out ahead. She'd sounded pretty desperate to avoid having Maesawa ask her out. She'd said her friend had a crush on him and that being asked out instead of that friend would be "not reading the air."

But since that confession never happened, Tomoe's problem had fixed itself. That was most likely why they'd escaped June 27 and the twenty-eighth had finally arrived.

It made sense to him. At least, Sakuta couldn't think of any other explanation.

The reason he was still worried was that the core problem hadn't been resolved.

Maesawa had misread the situation. But if he found out the truth, he would probably ask Tomoe out again. And if that triggered the loop, they might get stuck in the same day again.

It wouldn't take long for Maesawa to work out that Sakuta and Tomoe weren't a couple. Sakuta had asked Mai out in front of the entire student body a month before, and it wouldn't take much observation to notice that he and Tomoe were never together.

The same problem happened if Sakuta talked Mai down and once again got her to agree to date him. That would make it obvious he had nothing to do with Tomoe.

But at this point, Sakuta's mind went blank.

"....."

He'd realized just what a jam he was really in.

"Azusagawa, do you know what we call situations like this?"

"Checkmate...?"

"Good luck! I'm gonna put my socks on now."

She hung up.

"I rate less than socks, huh?"

2

He and Kaede ate breakfast, and he got ready—this meant changing into his Minegahara uniform. There was a tacit understanding that everyone had to participate in special classes—not every Saturday, but about half of them. These were normal classes that lasted all morning. They were largely spent going over content they'd run out of time for during the week.

What the government considered a doable pace and what the actual teachers on the ground could practically get through didn't always add up, and sometimes it created these weird extra days.

"Right, I'm outta here, Kaede!"

"Have fun!"

She waved him out the door, and he headed to school, yawning.

The world seemed peaceful. Nobody seemed surprised that June 28 had come. The only difference from a typical morning was the lack of office workers. That meant the crowds at the station were pretty thin.

He boarded the Enoden at Fujisawa Station. It was the same. Nobody saying, "Finally it's the twenty-eighth!" or "I liked the first June twenty-seventh best" or "I wonder if June twenty-ninth will ever happen."

Class 2-1 was the same.

As far as he could tell from his seat by the windows, everyone was acting like they always did.

There seemed no point in watching them further, so Sakuta turned his attention to the waters by Shichirigahama Beach.

The sun sparkled on the ocean's surface. The sky had a lovely gradation from blue to white. And between the sea and the sky was the straight line of the horizon.

It was a pleasant view.

"Hey."

He would have to apologize to Mai later. Getting her to forgive him wouldn't be easy, but it was the only way out of this mess.

"Are you listening?"

Apparently, someone was talking to him.

He looked up. There was a girl standing in front of his desk.

His classmate Saki Kamisato. She had her arms folded and was glaring down at him. Strong-willed eyes. Flawless makeup. She left the top button of her uniform undone. Everyone in class knew her; she was a central figure in the most popular group of girls. And she was Yuuma's girlfriend.

"How dare you ignore me!"

"I never imagined you would speak to me again, Kamisato."

"You're such a creep."

What did Yuuma see in her? His taste boggled the mind.

"After school, rooftop, we need to talk."

With that unilateral declaration, she went back to her seat. Four other girls from her group gathered around her.

"What did Azusagawa do?"

"Saki! You poor thing!"

A baffling take on the situation.

He'd done nothing to her, yet he was being treated like the abusive one. Wouldn't somebody take his side?

“It’s about Yuuma. Don’t worry.”

“Oh... Hey, look what I found yesterday.”

The topic soon moved to a neat phone app.

“That’s hilarious!”

“Cool, let’s all play!”

“I’m in!”

Their voices echoed through the room.

Another group of girls was watching this from a distance, looking annoyed. They didn’t say anything, though. Any time it seemed like the two groups might make eye contact, the members of the second quickly looked away and focused on their own conversation.

Girl cliques seemed a little more intense than the male version.

As he mulled this over, Sakuta noticed something.

He felt like the cast assembled around Saki had changed in the last few days. Trying to put a finger on the difference, Sakuta glanced around the room. One girl was sitting alone at the back, not talking to anyone. That girl had been part of Saki’s group a few days before.

A falling out? You saw this sort of thing happen at schools sometimes.

Normally, he wouldn’t have paid any attention, but today, it bugged him.

“.....”

Maybe she just reminded him of Tomoe.

Once first-period English (a subject he hated) was over, Sakuta popped by Mai’s class, 3-1. But she wasn’t there. Her bag wasn’t at her desk, either.

After the remaining three classes, it was time to leave. He stopped by her class again, but there was no sign of her. He asked a girl who sat near her.

“She wasn’t here today,” she snickered, stifling a laugh. Likely a lingering effect of Satuka’s declaration of love in front of the whole school.

“Thank you,” he said and went back downstairs. As he was changing out of his

slippers at the shoe cubbies, he got a nagging feeling he was forgetting something.

“Oh, right.”

Saki Kamisato had summoned him to the roof again.

“You’re late!”

She was angry before he even arrived.

“So? What do you want?”

He ignored her mood, getting right down to business. He had to get to work. Since he didn’t have time to beat around the bush, it was best to get the trouble over with.

“I told you to stay away from Yuuma.”

“I’m pretty sure you told me not to talk to him.”

“Same difference.”

“Fair. They’re the same thing, and I didn’t forget. I’ll carry it to my grave.”

It was a memorable event. It wasn’t often he encountered such open hostility. Maybe Yuuma was drawn to this side of Saki. Calling Sakuta to the roof alone with none of her followers in tow could be interpreted as being highly independent.

“What’s with that one girl?” he asked.

“Huh?”

“The one not with your group anymore.”

“None of your business,” she snarled.

She seemed genuinely angry now. But not at Sakuta—at someone else. Probably the girl in question.

“She steal a guy?”

“Yep.”

He’d meant it as a joke, but that had backfired. But Saki was dating Yuuma. He wouldn’t be that easily stolen.

“Not from me,” she clarified.

So one of the other girls in her clique.

“She was hanging out with him behind our backs.”

Sakuta felt like he could guess the rest.

“More importantly, what’s with the science lab girl?”

“Huh?”

“What’s her relationship with Yuuma? They talk a lot.”

This was obviously Rio. A hornet’s nest best left untouched, but the worst person had picked up on it. How should he answer?

“Did you ask Kunimi?”

“You’re friends with her, too.”

“I dunno if she’d agree.”

“Just answer the question!”

“Man, you’re uptight today...”

He almost asked if it was that time of the month again but stopped himself before it was too late.

“Are you constipated?” he asked instead.

“Wha?!”

“Is it all tight up there, too?”

“Drop dead! Right now!”

Saki turned bright red and left the roof, slamming the door behind her.

“Eat more fiber!”

Sadly, he didn’t think she’d heard his helpful advice.

This time, he finished changing into his shoes and left school.

He headed for the station. When a train bound for Fujisawa came in, he got on board. A fifteen-minute journey down the single rail.



Fujisawa Station was the end of the line. He got off and bought a curry-filled roll from the shop outside the gates. He ate it on the way to work.

“Good morning!” he said, stepping into the restaurant. His manager was at the register.

“Morning. Let’s make it a good one!”

“Yes, sir.”

Sakuta managed to avoid yawning in front of the guy and quickly went down the back hall to the break room. There was a row of lockers, and the men’s changing area was behind these. The girls got an actual room, but... The world was hardly fair.

“Sup,” Yuuma Kunimi greeted him, emerging from behind the lockers.

“Sup,” Sakuta said, taking Yuuma’s place. He started changing. “Kunimi,” he began as he pulled on his waiter uniform’s shirt.

“Mm?”

“Could be a pain later, so I’ll say it now. Your girlfriend came after me again.”

“What a tragedy,” Yuuma laughed, like it was no skin off his nose.

“It’s time to choose. Me or her!”

“World’s easiest dilemma. Fine, I’ll give her a call tonight.”

“Please.”

Sakuta pulled on the waiter slacks.

“Oh, also...”

“There’s more?”

“There a guy on your team named Maesawa?”

“Mm? Oh, Yousuke?”

So his full name was Yousuke Maesawa.

“What’s he like?”

“Uh, well...he’s the best player our school has.”

Sakuta stepped out into the break room, tying his apron on.

“So he’s pretty popular with the girls,” Kunimi added.

“Good, good, keep giving me reasons to hate him.”

“Such a bad attitude,” Yuuma chided, shaking his head but laughing. “You have a fight?”

“It’s a long story, but...if he’s a good dude, it might weigh on my conscience.”

It had all been an accident, but he *had* given the guy the wrong idea about his relationship with Tomoe. And this had prevented him from asking her out like he’d planned.

He was sure Maesawa would figure out the truth in time, but he did feel a little guilty. Even if the dude had talked shit about Sakuta.

“I’m not one to talk behind people’s backs,” Yuuma said, but then trailed off. He actually meant it.

“I see! He’s a real pervert, then?”

“I dunno about that, but on the way home from practice yesterday, he said he was gonna dump his girlfriend because she wouldn’t sleep with him. He says a lot of mean things about his exes. I always think...I never wanna be like *that*.”

If Yuuma was going this far, this guy must’ve been a real dirtbag. Being popular really doomed you as a person.

“So he’s got a girl?”

“Yeah, third-year from another school. She’s pretty cute.”

“But Kamisato’s cuter?”

“Well, of course.”

This was how girls wanted their boyfriends to talk. Rio’s face floated across Sakuta’s mind, and he felt a little sorry for her.

“Valuable info. Thanks.”

Seemed like he could safely despise Maesawa. Sakuta couldn’t believe he had the nerve to ask Tomoe out when he had a girlfriend already.

But it was time to start work, so Sakuta and Yuuma punched their time cards. On the way out to the floor, the manager called out to them. “Kunimi, Azusagawa, over here.”

“Yeah?” They turned to find him standing next to a girl. On the short side, looking nervous. Not used to the waitress uniform at all.

“This is Koga. She’ll be starting here today. Show her the ropes, will you?”

Sakuta had recognized her right away.

Tomoe seemed surprised to see him, too.

“You’re from our school, right?” Yuuma asked.

“Oh, right! Both of you boys go to Minegahara. So she’s a kohai twice over! Look after her!”

The manager sailed off to his office as if his job was done. They could hear him making work calls soon after.

“T-Tomoe Koga. Nice to meet you.”

“I’m Yuuma Kunimi, and this is Sakuta Azusagawa. We’re both second-year... but you two know each other, right?”

Sakuta glanced at Tomoe.

“Yeah, I said we’d kicked each other’s butts once, right?”

Tomoe’s hands snapped to her behind.

“Why would you tell anyone that?!” she yelped, flustered. Were those tears?

“I can’t keep quiet about anything that funny.”

“I can’t believe you!”

Tomoe glared at him.

“We may not get on well,” Sakuta announced. “I leave her in your hands, Kunimi!”

“Uh, wait! Sakuta!”

Sakuta ignored him, heading out to the floor.

Having forced Kunimi to train Tomoe, Sakuta had to work that much harder waiting tables.

He led customers to their seats and took their orders. Once the food was ready, he took it to their tables, and if there were customers trying to leave, he manned the registers. When he had a spare moment, he refilled the glasses and coffee cups at the beverage counter.

By dinner, every seat was full, and there was a line waiting for tables to open.

It might have been Tomoe's first day, but by peak rush time, she was out there pulling her weight.

She had two jobs. First, clearing the dishes. Second, resetting the empty tables.

Seeing her stretch to her full height to wipe the back edge of the tables definitely put a grin on Sakuta's face. But she was still moving a bit slow, and every time he saw her carrying a wobbling pile of dishes, it just made him nervous. Twice, a plate had slipped free, and she'd been saved by Yuuma's quick grab. If Sakuta had been the one training her, those dishes would have been done for.

But the dinner rush slowed, and the flow of customers abated. Tables began opening up. It grew dark outside, and the hands on the clock spun past eight.

Sakuta was in back turning in an order when he found Yuuma and Tomoe at the kitchen counter. He was showing her how to polish the forks and knives. Chatting as they worked.

"Between my phone and clothes, I just needed a little more money. You?"

"More or less the same."

Even as they talked, their hands kept moving. They dunked the utensil tips in hot water, getting them warm, then polished them with a soft cloth. This made them sparkle. Tomoe seemed surprised by how new the flatware looked.

As Sakuta watched from a distance, the bell rang—signaling the arrival of a new customer. He hurried back out on the floor.

Three young girls were waiting. They took one look at Sakuta and yelped with

surprise.

He recognized their uniforms, of course. They were the summer uniforms from his school, Minegahara High. All three of them wore their collar buttons undone—they were Tomoe's friends from class. He'd seen them with her before.

The girl in front had long hair and strong-willed eyes. Right behind her was a short girl with big-framed, fake-looking glasses.

"Tomoe said she was working here!" the glasses girl said. She was talking to the tall girl with short hair at the back of the group.

"That's right," said the girl at the front.

"Table for three?"

"Yeah."

The girl in front was clearly acting on behalf of the whole group. From this alone, Sakuta figured out she must have been Rena. The way she acted was just like a girl in his class—Yuuma's girlfriend, Saki Kamisato. That unique, upbeat confidence girls got when they *knew* they were the cutest in class.

She wore her skirt short and her collar open, and she had put her tie in a fancy knot. The girls around her were all copying that look.

Cute was justice. Uncool or unhip things were evil. Those were the classroom rules, and she was the queen of them.

"Will this do?" he asked, leading them to a four-top booth.

"Sure." Rena spoke for the group again. As he watched them sit down, Sakuta remembered why Tomoe had fled from Maesawa's advances.

Given how confident Rena seemed, Tomoe might have been right about the outcome. People got kicked out of cliques all the time. Sakuta had seen similar things happen in his own class.

The other two sat down opposite Rena, after her. They didn't hesitate. It was like this was how they always sat. They must have had a fixed seating arrangement, Tomoe included. That meant Tomoe's seat was next to Rena.

“When you’re ready to order, just press this button.”

“Oh, wait.”

“Should I take your order now?” Sakuta pulled out the digital order pad.

“Are you serious about Tomoe?”

“I’m sorry, this location doesn’t have anything like that on the menu.”

“It’s a sincere question.”

She was using polite grammar, but it didn’t sound at all polite. And yet that failed to rub Sakuta the wrong way. He got a weird vibe from them, curiosity mixed with expectation.

“You just got dumped by Sakurajima, so I find it hard to trust you here.”

“What are we talking about?” he asked, not following the conversation.

“Tomoe’s certainly cute, but what else do you like about her?” interjected the girl with glasses.

This was equally cryptic.

“I’m starting to think there’s a misunderstanding here.”

“Don’t hide it! We already know.” The glasses girl laughed.

“Oh! Tomoe! There you are!” the tall girl called across the restaurant.

All four of them turned to look. Tomoe must have sensed this, because she turned and found them staring at her.

She flinched slightly and then nervously averted her eyes. For a moment, she seemed ready to flee into the back but then thought better of it and came running over.

“H-hi! You really came?”

“We promised we would.”

“That uniform’s cute.”

“Definitely cute.”

Within seconds, the whole area became a schoolgirl domain. Once the *cute*

chorus began, Sakuta no longer belonged. Youth, glamor, and the liberty of seeing nothing beyond their own little world—all things that made him want to get the hell out of Dodge.

“Senpai, you’d better not be toying with Tomoe,” Rena warned, tugging Tomoe’s arm. She was staring right at Sakuta. She seemed to think this was intimidating, but it was hard to see her as any kind of threat. After so much time buffeted by the gale force of Mai’s glare, this felt like a gentle breeze.

“R-Rena! Don’t!”

Tomoe looked like she was in trouble here. She kept glancing at Sakuta for help.

By now, he’d largely figured out what was going on. Rena seemed to have jumped to the same conclusion Maesawa had. And not only had Tomoe not tried to clear it up, she didn’t even want to.

“The start of a relationship is critical! You’ve got to take charge!”

“R-right.”

She glanced at him again for help. Just then a new customer arrived. “Koga, could you seat them?” he suggested. Then, he turned back to the table. “When you’re ready to order, just press that button.”

With that burst of professionalism, Sakuta moved away to take an order at another table.

Tomoe clasped her hands together apologetically and darted off toward the customer waiting at the front door.

While Sakuta took orders from a family of four, he could feel three sets of eyes boring into his back. Trying to escape them, he took refuge in the break room. Tomoe showed up shortly after.

“Uh, I’d better explain?”

“You’re off at nine?”

“Huh?”

“We can talk after work.”

“But... But if I don’t explain...,” she dithered, wringing her hands.

“I won’t tell your friends anything until I’ve heard you out.”

“O-okay.”

Yuuma called for Tomoe, and she went back to work. Sakuta watched her go, grimly aware that without his knowledge, the situation had taken a turn for the worse.

3

Sakuta got off work at 9:20. Lingered customers had prevented him from leaving at nine sharp.

But that went for Tomoe as well. She’d had a rough first day and looked pretty tired.

Sakuta changed and went outside, resting on a bicycle parked in the rear lot. It was his. He’d left it here the other day when it started raining during a shift. But at least his trip home tonight would be a quick one.

Sakuta had planned to wait a minute and leave if Tomoe didn’t show, but she came out less than ten seconds later, staring at her phone.

When she saw him waiting, she came running over, still clutching her phone.

“So I have a fav—,” she began.

“No.”

“I haven’t even asked yet!” Tomoe cried, annoyed.

“It’s a no.”

“At least hear me out!”

“A big no to that, too.”

“Whyyyy?”

“Because you’re obviously gonna try to convince me to let everyone think we’re dating,” he said, sighing.

If she was struggling with Adolescence Syndrome, he didn’t mind helping, but

this was something else entirely.

“Can ya read minds?!” Her hands flew to her chest in a gesture of shock. Her accent was slipping out again, but he didn’t think she was aware of this.

“You told me yesterday you’d rather die than have the boy your friend loves come after you.”

“I didn’t go that far!”

“Right, you said if he asked you out, that would be ‘not reading the air.’”

“Yeah...”

“And that’s why it’s a no.”

“That don’t make sense!”

“I think you’ve got bigger fish to fry.”

Like why had June 27 stopped looping, and why had the twenty-eighth arrived? Why had the twenty-seventh repeated in the first place? Sakuta’s working theory might not have been accurate.

“Like what?”

“Adolescence Syndrome.”

“We made it to today, so who cares?” Tomoe was clearly *done* with that whole thing. “That doesn’t matter now! I’m in *real* trouble!”

Maintaining her friendships was clearly her first priority and took precedence over everything else. To the point where Adolescence Syndrome wasn’t even a factor.

Which meant discussing the matter further was a waste of time.

Sakuta was forced to focus on her request.

“No matter the reason, lying is always wrong.”

“Urp.” This platitude made Tomoe visibly flinch.

“Imagine how Maesawa feels!”

From what Yuuma had said, honestly, it wasn’t clear if Maesawa was actually serious about Tomoe, though. He still hadn’t broken up with his current

girlfriend, and there was a strong possibility he just thought Tomoe would be easy. She *did* seem like a bit of a pushover.

“Quit being right...” Tomoe moaned, hanging her head.

“And most of all, I don’t wanna.”

“That’s just infuriating!”

“I mean, how long would we have to keep this up? Until the third-years graduate? No way. We’ll get caught. And that would make everything worse.”

“I have a plan for that!”

“Huh?” This was unexpected.

“You don’t believe me!”

“Even if I did, it doesn’t matter.”

“Argh, you’re awful!”

“Well, sorry! If you hate me that much, I’ll get out of your life.”

He shoved hard on the pedals, but his bike didn’t get far.

He looked back to find her clutching the back of his seat for dear life.

“We only need to keep this going for the rest of the term!”

“I really don’t care about your plan, Koga.”

“Once summer vacation arrives and we’re not in school, we can just drift apart! Then we can be normal for second term!”

“So this is a premeditated crime? I didn’t take you for the crafty type.”

“I’m just desperate!”

“I can tell.”

She was physically restraining a bicycle, after all.

But her plot was full of holes. The biggest one being Sakuta himself.

“I hate to bring this up, but given my reputation at school, are you sure you want people thinking you’re dating me?”

“Among the first-years, at least, you’ve looped back around to datable. It’ll be

fine.”

“I— What?”

Looped back around how? He had to know more! No, that was a lie.

“No normal person could scream love from the center of the schoolyard.”

“Yeah, and everyone’s laughing at me for it.”

Then again, Tomoe’s friends had been pretty okay with it. In the second-year classes, he was still being thoroughly ignored, but Rena and the other two had been talking to him of their own accord.

Sakuta’s awkward status at school had been caused by rumors that he’d sent classmates to the hospital in junior high, but those had gone around over a year ago. Tomoe and the other first-years hadn’t experienced them firsthand, so maybe the stigma didn’t run as deep. It was just a thing their senpai said.

And as the first term drew to a close, the first-years had started developing a culture of their own, so perception gaps opened up between the different years.

“Personally, I think it’s kinda romantic.”

“I ain’t doing that for you, Koga.”

“If you did, I’d be super weirded out by it.”

He really didn’t get how the schoolgirl mind worked.

“Oh, fine. If dating is too sudden, we can be somewhere on the path.”

“You’re getting ahead of yourself.”

“More than a senpai, less than a boyfriend.”

“A line that fuzzy would be harder to fake than dating. Are you mad?”

“Mad how?”

“You want me to pretend to be a *sorta* boyfriend?”

He looked her over again. Tomoe was wearing the standard Minegahara summer uniform. A white blouse and short skirt. Navy-blue socks and loafers. Everything small, compact, perfectly balanced.

“Well, I’m sure you’ve dated somebody before,” he said.

Girls these days usually had.

“R-right... Not, you know, for long, but...” Tomoe avoided his gaze.

“Hmm.”

“Wh-what?”

“You’re so grown-up.”

“Now you’re being creepy. Remember, you’re supposed to act like you’re in love with me!”

Tomoe had clearly decided to just assume he was on board, even though he had agreed to no such thing.

“Do you even realize what you’re trying to do here?”

The main target of this lie might just have been Maesawa, but to keep the truth from getting out, they had to fool everyone around them. Tomoe was already misleading her friends, and it would only spread from there.

Information about who was dating whom spread rapidly without any help from those involved. Even if it wasn’t true.

Especially if it involved someone as infamous as Sakuta.

To make Maesawa believe the story, Sakuta and Tomoe would have to fool the entire school.

“We’re talking about lying to a thousand kids here.”

That was not some little fib.

“I know that!”

Tomoe was unmoved.

“Really?”

“Really.”

Did she have nerves of steel? Or was she just so pure of heart that even this came off as sincere? He wasn’t sure.

“Anyway, please!” She put her hands together, bowing.

“Look...what’s in it for me?”

He could think of plenty of downsides. Primarily ones involving Mai. The start of their relationship seemed to be getting even further away. In the original timeline, they were already officially a couple, so he should have been happily flirting with her somewhere...

“If you help, I’ll do anything you want—one time only.”

“Nah, there’s really nothing I want from you,” Sakuta said.

“I—I mean *anything*?” she emphasized, looking up at him.

She didn’t seem that confident. This really struck a nerve.

“A girl your age shouldn’t offer that to any guy.”

It was a little *too* effective.

“B-but if I don’t do something, I’ll lose my place in class!”

Tomoe stared at her hands, deflating.

“I’ll be alone on breaks, eat lunch alone, go to the bathroom alone—I couldn’t bear that!”

“That last one *should* be done alone!”

No way did they enter the stalls together. Or did they, and Sakuta just didn’t know? Girls boggled the mind.

“Look, you’ve probably already guessed, so it can’t hurt to tell you. I lived in Fukuoka until last year. The only friends I have here are the ones I’ve made in high school. Rena, Hinako, and Aya.”

“The three from today?”

“Mm.” Tomoe nodded, staring at the ground.

“Being alone can be easier, you know. You don’t have to change yourself to fit in, and once you get used to it, it isn’t as lonely as it looks.”

In Sakuta’s case, he had Yuuma and Rio, and lately Mai. That helped.

“I’m not worried about being lonely.”

“Huh? Then what else?”

“Being alone is...embarrassing.”

She whispered the last word.

But this cleared up a lot for Sakuta.

“I don’t want anyone pointing at me and going, ‘She’s always alone.’”

“Ah.”

This was bizarrely convincing. To the point where he finally got off his bike.

She wasn’t afraid of isolation. She didn’t want others seeing her as an outcast. She didn’t want everyone gossiping about her. And most of all, she didn’t want to hear their derisive laughter.

To an immature mind, the wounds of shame ran deeper than those of loneliness. Feeling pathetic, feeling as if your worth is seeping away...and with your confidence torn down, your heart closes itself off for good.

“.....”

Tomoe stared silently at the ground. Until Sakuta put his hand on her head.

“Senpai?” She looked up at him anxiously.

Kaede had said the same thing when she was being bullied.

“Going to school is...embarrassing.”

The dread of anyone seeing her being bullied was so great that Kaede could no longer leave the house. She’d grown terrified of people’s stares.

And Sakuta saw her in Tomoe.

The reason for the shunning didn’t matter. There was no telling what could set it off. The smallest thing could create that kind of air, but the moment it did, it spread like a disease. By then, it was too late. It was almost impossible to cure.

Especially in girl group culture, which was clearly not like that of guys. Whatever the official stance was, it was clear from the sidelines that things weren’t healthy. And if things weren’t working out in one group, the odds you

could move to another were really low.

“You’re in the main group, right, Koga?”

“Huh?”

“You’re the ‘cutest girls in class.’”

“That’s...hard to say yes to.”

She pursed her lips, but this was all the confirmation he needed.

If the leader of the main group turned on you, it was definitely bad. She had the most clout. No one would go against her. No one could. If you made her mad, you were banished to an island of isolation. So you always agreed with her. If she said it was cute, it was cute. If she said it was gross, it was gross.

And in this case, it was Rena Kashiba who held that position, and of all people, the boy Rena had a crush on was coming after Tomoe.

Sakuta finally got why this was such a big problem for her.

He took a deep breath and let it out.

“Fine,” he said.

“Huh?”

“Let’s lie to a thousand students.”

“Really?”

“But I have a condition.”

“M-my body?” Tomoe stammered, clutching herself.

“Nobody’s getting turned on by your scrawny ass. Don’t be rude.”

“You’re being way ruder!”

“Just listen.”

“O-okay.”

She nodded nervously. He could hear her gulp.

Sakuta let out another long breath.

“You’ve got to root for the Japan team in the third match of the group stage,”

he said grimly.

“Huh?” Tomoe gaped at him.

“If they lose, the deal is off.”

“What does that have to do with anything?!”

He refused to explain himself.

“Just do it!” he insisted and hopped back on his bike.

“Ah! Wait!”

“We’re done here!”

“I’ll cheer the soccer game! But I have another request.”

He turned back to find her fidgeting.

“A-about tomorrow...”

“Yes?”

“You’re working until two, right?”

“Yeah.”

“A-after that, can we go f-f-for—?”

“A forehead flick?”

“No!” Tomoe shrieked, putting her hands protectively on her forehead.

A grown-up couple passing by laughed at them. “Lovers’ tiff?” one asked.

Growing even redder, Tomoe finally finished.

“F-for a date.”

When they were done talking, Sakuta walked with Tomoe until they were near her home, then rode his bike back to his apartment. Tomoe lived surprisingly close by.

Late June, with the heat of summer starting to roll in, the humidity rising—riding with the wind on your face wasn’t half-bad.

White clouds crisscrossed the darkening sky. The stars were starting to show. Even Sakuta knew the Summer Triangle. Vega, from the constellation Lyra.

Altair, from Aquila. Aka Orihime and Hikoboshi, lovers in Japanese legend separated by the Milky Way, able to meet only once a year, on July 7—the Star Festival.

He had to think for a minute before he remembered the third star. Deneb, from the Cygnus constellation. The girl who had told him that was his first love. A high school girl named Shouko Makinohara, whom he'd met in his third year of junior high.

He had no idea where she was or what she was doing now. No way to get in touch with her. He might never see her again.

When he tried to remember her face, he found his memories were growing fuzzy. He couldn't quite picture her. Instead, Mai's face floated into his mind, looking cross.

"Now what?"

He remembered what Tomoe had said before they parted.

"F-for a date."

"Why?" Sakuta had asked. A rational question.

"Rena asked me what our date plans were, so...like that."

"Like what?"

"A weekend date!"

"You're really pushing your luck here."

"Your eyes went all scary!"

"A forehead flick is still in the cards."

Tomoe hid her forehead again.

"Can't you just go, 'Wow, we did so many things this weekend!' and avoid specifics?"

"Just in case, I want photographic evidence."

".....You really cover your bases."

He could see where she was coming from. "We had a date this weekend!"

naturally led to “Any pics?” “Show us!” and then where would she be? It would be downright unnatural to have taken nothing. These days, everyone had a phone in their pocket, and they all had cameras. He hated it.

So now he was stuck going on a date with Tomoe tomorrow.

This was going downhill fast.

How would he explain this to Mai? She was already pissed enough after seeing him with his arms around Tomoe yesterday. If he showed up with even more Tomoe-related news, she’d unleash the full force of her fury.

She would definitely do something spiteful, as if him upsetting her gave her the right to do so. And since he was partially to blame, he couldn’t very well refuse. And when his squirming reached its peak, she’d grin like she’d never had so much fun.

And that would be...

“Crap, I’m starting to look forward to it.”

The more he thought about it, the better it sounded. Sakuta pedaled the rest of the way home with a huge grin on his face.

4

He took a nice long bath to ease the fatigue from the long shift and emerged in his underwear, where he found Kaede on the couch, watching TV. This was unusual.

It was an animal show...no, a documentary following a zookeeper around. Looking after a newborn baby panda seemed like a lot of work.

Kaede had their cat, Nasuno, clutched to her chest, all her attention focused on the baby panda’s first steps.

Only half paying attention, Sakuta got a bottle of sports drink out of the fridge and poured some into a cup. He chugged it.

His body was still warm from the bath, and the chilled beverage felt amazing. He opened the fridge again to get another glass.

“Oh!” Kaede said. “L-look, it’s her!”

She was pointing at the screen frantically.

“Someone we know?”

“Yes!”

“Huh?”

He’d been joking, so her answer caught him off guard. Confused, he pulled his head out of the fridge, turning his eyes to the screen.

“.....”

He *did* know that girl.

It was a commercial for a sports drink. The same blue-labeled brand he had in his hand right now. She was holding it out toward the screen, grinning mischievously. “You want a sip? Heh-heh. Well, you can’t have any!” Then she ran away from the camera, kicking up white sand behind her.

It was Mai.

“Th-this is the girl you brought over, right?”

“Yeah.”

That was definitely Mai. Mai Sakurajima, the famous actress.

But this was the first Sakuta had heard about her being in a commercial.

Since it was a commercial, it was soon over.

And the moment it was, the intercom rang.

“What? At this hour?”

It was already past ten.

Puzzled, he picked up the receiver.

“Yeah?” he said.

“It’s me.”

A curt response. The same voice he’d just heard on TV.

Three minutes later, Sakuta had let Mai in and was on his knees. Still in his

underwear. Mai was sitting on the bed in front of him, her legs crossed. Giving him a withering look.

“Why haven’t you shown up to make excuses?”

“If I may be so bold, I made multiple attempts to do so, and you were not available.”

He had actually gone to her class twice that day during break and on his way home, but Mai had been nowhere to be found.

“You’re blaming me for it?”

“I clearly didn’t try hard enough.”

“Then what do you have to say for yourself?”

“Um, Mai, you look really nice.”

He’d noticed the second he opened the door. She didn’t normally look anything like this. Her makeup was on point, and her hair was clearly professionally done. It curled inward adorably. Not Mai’s usual style at all.

“I had a shoot for a fashion magazine. I’m doing this for you, you know!”

That’s why she hadn’t been in school.

“You look incredibly cute.”

“I know.”

“I love you.”

“If you try and joke about this, I’ll step on you.”

She lifted a black tight-clad leg and placed her foot on his knee.

He could feel her warmth through it. And the slick feel of the tights.

This was a valuable reward.

He struggled to keep that recognition off his face.

“Don’t look so happy.”

He’d clearly failed. Mai removed her foot. Such a pity.

“I just saw your commercial.”

“Oh.”

Mai stared out the window, looking bored.

“You never mentioned it.”

“I knew when it would air, so I planned to tell you just before it did and surprise you. But since someone decided to fool around with a first-year... Do you have anything to say for yourself?”

“I’m very sorry.”

“Do you really regret it?”

“I do.”

“I’m not so sure.”

“I regret it! But... Well, this isn’t the best timing, but...”

“But what?”

“I could use some help with that first-year.”

Sakuta had to maintain an apparent connection with Tomoe for the remainder of the term. Engaging in a two-front war without a word to Mai would be madness. He’d get caught. So it was best to bring her in now.

But with Mai in this mood, it was difficult.

“Sakuta.”

“Yes? What?”

“Maybe put some clothes on first.”

Sakuta was still in his underwear.

After donning shorts and a T-shirt, Sakuta got back on his knees, watching Mai’s expression closely as he explained Tomoe’s situation. Why Tomoe was in the empty classroom the day before. How she’d ended up in his arms. How a basketball senpai named Yousuke Maesawa had asked her out and placed her in a dicey situation. He explained all of it. And how Tomoe had coincidentally started working at the same restaurant he did and asked him to maintain a “more than a senpai, less than a boyfriend” relationship for the rest of the term.

He explained it all, omitting nothing.

Except the Adolescence Syndrome... Sakuta chose not to say a word about how he and Tomoe had experienced June 27 three times or how Mai had agreed to go out with him twice.

Mai was back at work, and it was going well. He didn't want to worry her unnecessarily, and telling her what she'd done in a different timeline seemed like breaking the rules.

When he finished, Mai said, "High school girls have it hard," like she wasn't remotely impressed.

She was a high school girl herself but was seemingly unaware of this.

"I understand the situation."

She sure accepted that easily. He'd expected a good deal more berating.

"That's it?"

"If I yelled at you here, you'd just enjoy it."

She sure knew him well.

"The best way to punish you is to not punish you."

"You've gotta give me something."

"Nope."

"Aww."

"Don't sulk."

Maybe he should try enjoying this instead? No, he felt like she should be objecting.

"But it doesn't make sense to me," Mai said.

"What part?"

"Lying about dating—you hate that sort of thing."

"We're not pretending to date! Just...being more than friends."

"Same difference."

“I don’t think anyone likes lying about this stuff.”

“That’s why it doesn’t add up. You’re hiding something.”

Mai leaned forward, glaring at him.

“I’ve been staring at your feet and getting very turned on.”

“I—I know *that*.”

Holding her skirt in place, Mai recrossed her legs.

“D-don’t stare like that!”

“It’s not hurting anything.”

“Quit distracting me and confess!”

Her eyes were clear. She meant business.

“Koga...said the same thing Kaede did.”

“What?”

Sakuta spoke carefully, choosing his words.

“If her friend finds out Maesawa asked her out and kicks her out of the group and she loses her place in class...she’ll be embarrassed by it.”

Embarrassed.

If Tomoe hadn’t said that, he would never have agreed to this “more than a senpai, less than a boyfriend” scheme.

“With Kaede, the nightmare scenario actually happened, so...”

It brought all those memories back.

Refusing to go to school, holing up in her room, and ultimately finding herself tormented by Adolescence Syndrome. Bruises and cuts all over her body.

Unable to accept the reality of it, his mother’s mind had deteriorated, and she’d been hospitalized. They no longer lived together.

And the root of it had been so trivial. Kaede had simply failed to respond to a message from another girl.

That little slipup had spiraled out of control, and two years later, the fallout

was still impacting Kaede's and Sakuta's lives.

The smallest things could completely disrupt everything. So...

"I just wanted to do something about it this time."

It wasn't like he thought this was the right decision. It was more like making up for past failures. He might just be using Tomoe's situation to work through his own issues. The trauma of Kaede's situation still haunted him.

"Sakuta."

"What?"

"This is so dull."

"That's what I get for being serious."

"If you bring your sister into it, I can't very well complain, can I?"

This was clearly a complaint. She was radiating frustration.

"I know you know this, Sakuta."

"Know what?"

"Clean up the mess this lie causes."

"I'll make sure we don't get caught and carry it to my grave."

"If you know how hard keeping silent is, then fine."

"Maesawa has a girlfriend but is after Koga anyway, and he's threatening to break up with his current girlfriend because she won't have sex with him. I'm not losing any sleep over someone who'd say that shit."

"Ugh, *men*."

Mai's scorn seemed to include Sakuta for some reason.

"I am utterly devoted to you, Mai."

"You might just fall in love with this first-year while pretending to be more than a senpai."

"Have I earned no trust?"

"I won't wait a second longer than the end of first term."

“Does that mean you’ll definitely go out with me once this mess is over?”

“Well...”

Mai avoided his gaze.

“Depends on how I feel in the moment.”

“Ew.”

“Why are you acting disappointed?”

“If I know you’ll reward me afterward, I’ll have the strength to get through this.”

“Big talk for a problem you created yourself.”

Then Mai seemed to remember something. She mouthed an “Oh” and said, “Are you working tomorrow?”

“Yes.”

“Till when?”

“Two.”

“Hmm.”

She started swinging her legs cheerily. Her look was clearly expectant.

“I’ve got the afternoon free tomorrow.”

Was that an invitation to a date?

“The hydrangeas in Kamakura are still in bloom.”

She’d already picked a spot.

Having this much riding on it made what came next very hard for him.

“Um,” he said awkwardly.

Mai picked up on that right away and immediately looked bored.

“You already promised to take that first-year on a date?”

“Not a date per se, just...something date-like.”

“.....”

“Mai?”

She let out a very unmotivated sigh. “Fine.”

“.....”

“.....”

He waited for further complaint, but none came.

“No ‘She matters more than me, then?’”

“Why should I have to act jealous?”

“Aw.”

“I know you’re madly in love with me.”

“This is true.”

“That first-year is no competition.”

“Wow, such confidence.”

That was Mai Sakurajima for you. This was how Mai should be.

“So I’ll be generous this time.”

“Thank you.”

“But...well...”

Mai made a show of thinking. Two full seconds later, she flashed a malicious smile.

“But just forgiving you out of hand would set a bad precedent, so I’ll need a demonstration of your commitment.”

“Namely?”

“Figure something out.”

“Hmm.”

Sakuta leaned forward, getting on all fours and closing the gap between him and the bed she was sitting on.

“Wh-what are you doing?”

Flustered, Mai started backing away but soon ran up against the wall.

Sakuta kept moving forward.

“Stay back!” she warned, and her foot planted itself right in his face.

“Ow!” he said, his nose flattened. He rolled over onto the bed, faceup.

“What were you doing?”

“Demonstrating commitment.”

“That’s just lust!”

“Well...maybe.”

“There’s a proper order to these things! We’re not even going out yet!”

“This is the perfect moment to get past that!”

“It is not!”

“So discouraging.”

“And whose fault is that?”

She glared down at him.

“Entirely mine.”

“Then show remorse!”

Sakuta got on his knees for the third time.

“Well, as far as dates go, are you free next Sunday?”

“The week after tomorrow I’ll be in Kagoshima filming a TV show.”

“Oh.”

“.....”

Mai sat back up, giving him a suspicious look.

“You don’t seem surprised.”

This was because Mai had already told him about her role in the show. But this had been on his first time through June 27.

“Well, it is you, Mai. I figured you’d have a TV role in no time.”

“Naturally,” she said, but it was clearly still bugging her. Her eyes narrowed.

“Kagoshima sounds nice.”

“I’m not going for fun.”

Mai moved back to the edge of the bed, but her foot kicked a paper bag. The one she’d brought with her. She picked it up, said, “Here,” and handed it to Sakuta.

“Mm?”

“Take it.”

He did.

There was a cute dress inside. Clearly girls’ clothing.

“Is this supposed to replace you while you’re in Kagoshima?”

“It’s for your sister,” Mai said, looking disgusted.

“Huh?” Sakuta had no idea what she meant.

“I said I did a fashion shoot today, right? They let me keep the outfit.”

So she’d been wearing this earlier. It *did* smell good.

“But it’s a bit too girly for my tastes.”

She held it up, and there were frills on the skirt and sleeves.

“So you thought of Kaede?”

“She’s only a little shorter than me, so it should fit.”

“That wasn’t my concern...”

It just seemed odd to suddenly start giving Kaede clothes.

“It’s a roundabout way of suggesting you ought to pay more attention to your sister’s look.”

“So this time you’re trying a direct approach?”

“If she likes the panda pajamas, that’s fine. But she’s turning fifteen this year, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Maybe if she dresses up a bit, she’ll feel more like going out.”

“Ohhh...”

That explained it. Mai was worried about Kaede. She didn’t think it was right for her to stay trapped inside like this.

Not just feeling sympathy, not just saying “Poor thing”—no, she was trying to take productive steps.

“.....”

Before he knew it, he was staring up at her.

“Wh-what’s with that look?”

“I’m just happy you’re looking out for her.”

“Of course I am!”

Mai acted like it was nothing. As childish as she could be when she was teasing him, at times like this, she would suddenly act super mature. He couldn’t get enough of it. And it always made him feel like he didn’t deserve her.

“I’ll go get her,” he said, standing up.

“You’re sure?”

“Just don’t look scary.”

“I won’t!” she snapped, looking hurt.

His gaze bored into her. “Like, say, that face right now.”

“What about it?” she said with a flash of irritation. Then, she let that fade and smiled pleasantly.

The sheer speed of this transformation was sort of frightening in its own right. But if he said that, she might get genuinely angry, so he let it go.

He grabbed the door and flung it open, but it bumped into something and got stuck. It had only opened about two inches.

“Ugh...” came a muffled groan from outside.

He slowly pushed the door again, and this time, it opened all the way.

Kaede was outside, rubbing her forehead.

“What are you doing?”

Kaede looked up, and their eyes met. She winced and then yelped, “I wasn’t!”

He hadn’t even said anything yet.

“I wasn’t playing ninja or anything!”

“I...just figured you were eavesdropping.”

But apparently, she was playing on a much higher plane. She’d been reading some historical novels lately; maybe they were rubbing off.

“Well, nice timing.”

“What do you mean?” Kaede asked, surprised.

He pulled her into the room.

She took one look at Mai and hid behind him.

“Hello,” Mai said.

Kaede poked her face out just a bit. “H-hello,” she whispered, just loud enough for Mai to hear.

“Kaede, this is a present from Mai.” Sakuta handed her the cute, frilly dress. Hesitant, Kaede took it and finally peeled away from him.

“It is?” she asked, holding it up. Her eyes bored into it. It was clearly a source of fascination. “It’s so cute!”

“Wanna try it on?” Mai suggested.

Kaede looked at Sakuta, as if asking his permission.

He nodded, and Kaede darted out of the room as if she couldn’t wait.

He’d never seen his sister act like this before.

Guess it took a girl to know a girl.

After a few minutes, Kaede came back but only poked her head around the door, looking embarrassed.

“You have to promise not to laugh,” she said, glaring at Sakuta.

“I’ll laugh if it’s funny.”

She disappeared.

“Don’t worry,” Mai called after her. “I promise it’ll look perfect.”

With this encouragement, Kaede finally stepped inside.

“W-well?”

An elegant, summery white dress came down to her knees. A perfect fit for Kaede’s slim build.

“Yes! It’s totally cute.”

“I’ve never worn anything like this! It feels so awkward.”

Kaede was turning red. She kept stealing glances at herself in the window, clearly enjoying this. She turned left and right, even turned her back and looked over her shoulder.

“What do you think?” she asked, glancing at Sakuta.

“Not at all funny.”

“Why not just admit it’s cute?” Mai wore an impish grin.

He’d better change the topic fast.

“Make sure you thank Mai,” prompted Sakuta.

Kaede’s eyes met Mai’s, and she immediately hid behind her brother again but managed to stammer out a “Th-thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Er, um...” Kaede gave Mai a searching look.

“What?” Mai asked gently.

“Can I call you Mai, too?”

“Go right ahead. If I can call you Kaede.”

“S-sure.”

“Then, um...”

“Mm?”

“Mai, what’s your relationship with my brother?”

“Well...” Mai thought about this, then gave Sakuta a look. Clearly up to no good. “More than a senpai, less than a girlfriend,” she proclaimed with a definite note of spite.

“A-are you going to be his girlfriend?”

“That’s up to Sakuta. It seems he’s close to other girls, too.”

“Y-you are?!”

“Mai, don’t feed her misinformation.”

He was about to correct this, but an electronic beeping filled the room. An alarm set for eleven PM.

“Well, it’s late, so I’d better go,” Mai said, standing up. “No telling what Sakuta will do if I stay any later.”

“Wh-what would you do?” Kaede asked as she looked up at him.

“Something sexy,” he said. It was the plain truth.

Then, he followed Mai out. “I’ll walk you down,” he said.

They put shoes on in the doorway.

“Oh? Well, I’ll allow it. See you later, Kaede.”

“R-right!”

Still too scared to get close, Kaede just poked her head out of the doorway to Sakuta’s room, waving.

Sakuta and Mai stepped onto the waiting elevator in silence.

The doors closed, and the elevator started moving. It felt like their feet were off the ground.

“Thank you for today.”

“So formal.”

“It’s been a long time since Kaede talked to anyone but me. I’m really glad she got the chance today.”

“When you’re being sincere like this, I can’t even tease you for it.”

The elevator reached the first floor as she spoke.

They opened the self-locking glass door at the entrance and stepped outside. The sultry summer heat enveloped them.

“Guess summer’s officially here.”

Even with the sun down, it didn’t cool off at all. It was going to be hard to sleep for a while.

“You not a summer fan, Mai?”

“It’s so hard to avoid getting a tan,” she grumbled. But it was clear she was used to it by now.

“That explains the black tights.”

“W-well, I do get modeling work, so... What about you?”

“Mm?”

“Do you like summer?”

“A summer where I can’t admire your bare legs isn’t worth having.”

It was hot and sticky, and he had to expose the scars on his chest in swim class. Nothing good about it.

As they talked, they reached their destination. This was the apartment across the street, so it didn’t take long.

“Just don’t let the pretense get real,” Mai warned after a moment’s silence.

“Mm?”

“With the first-year girl.”

“My heart belongs to you, Mai. Like I said before.”

“.....”

She looked at him like she wanted to say something, but instead, she just parted with “Well, I’m glad you understand,” and went inside.

“Mai?”

“Good night!” she said. She’d turned back toward him in the doorway, giving him a wave.

“Good night,” he said, raising a hand in return.

The door closed behind her, and he watched until she was out of sight.

Sakuta turned around then, heading back to the waiting Kaede.

He had to be at work early tomorrow. Better get to bed. With any luck, he could sleep. But as the day drew to a close, there was one thing on his mind.

“Will tomorrow really come?” he muttered as he rode the elevator up.

But no one could tell him the answer.



The start of a relationship lie

1

Ultimately, June 29 arrived in the usual fashion.

Sakuta, woken up by his little sister shaking him, said, “Good morning, Kaede,” and reached for the digital alarm clock by the bed.

He checked the date, eyes still half-open, and it said Sunday, June 29, just like it should have.

“.....”

Should he be glad about that? He wasn’t looping through a day again, but since the cause and reason were still a mystery, it was hard to feel relieved.

If it would never happen again, he wanted someone to say as much. But if it was still a possibility...well, he’d like some warning.

Not knowing for sure was unsettling.

He watched Kaede leave the room in pursuit of their cat, Nasuno, and muttered to himself, “But if I’m spending time with Koga, I’ll figure it out eventually.”

Part of the reason he’d accepted Tomoe’s ridiculous proposal was that this would help him get to the bottom of her Adolescence Syndrome. The only way to alleviate this unease was to involve himself directly.

And there was value in studying a variety of Adolescence Syndrome cases. Kaede was still trapped by hers, and this knowledge might help him find a way to free her.

Fortunately, the physical wounds had vanished, but this was merely the result of avoiding any online interactions. If she was exposed to Internet maliciousness again, he was pretty sure they’d come back with a vengeance.

But she couldn’t spend the rest of her life cooped up indoors.

He wouldn’t allow anything that unfair.

“Besides, not knowing what day it’ll be until you wake up is really unnerving.”

There was no way to plan the day in advance. Because it might just be the previous day again.

Sakuta was still feeling anxious by the time he started work that morning. But he didn't let it affect his performance.

"But if tomorrow is today again, I'll have been working for free..."

He wouldn't exactly get a bonus for the hours he'd looped.

Once his shift ended, Sakuta offered a prayer to the god of paychecks, hoping that tomorrow would come.

He punched his card just after two, left the restaurant, and headed to the Enoden Fujisawa Station.

His train pass let him through the gates.

A train had just pulled out, so the platform was deserted.

He bought some water from a vending machine and sat on a bench. This was where Tomoe had wanted to meet.

The same platform he used every day on the way to school. Walls covered in posters advertising tourist attractions along the line. On a weekend afternoon, a totally different crowd used this line. Far more tourists than locals. A group of middle-aged women on their way to Kamakura. A family headed to the beach. Young couples going for a date on Enoshima. This was where Sakuta and Tomoe planned to go.

Time passed slowly. Eventually, he heard footsteps headed his way.

"H-hey, sorry I'm late."

He looked up and found Tomoe looking down at him awkwardly.

She was wearing jean shorts, with a sleeveless blouse that had frills on the shoulders and sides. Comfortable-looking sneakers. Her bare legs were exposed, but as if blocking his view of them, she was carrying a blue-and-white-striped marine tote bag in both hands.



A soft, feminine look definitely designed to match the seaside theme of the date.

When Sakuta said nothing, Tomoe's gaze started drifting all over the place. A mixture of tension and embarrassment marked her face.

"You're bright red."

"I was in a hurry!"

"Well, fine."

"Dates are no big deal!" she insisted, making this sound like an excuse somehow.

"But you're five minutes late, Koga."

They'd promised to meet here at two thirty, but Tomoe had shown up at 2:35, and the hands of the station clock were steadily marching toward 2:40.

"Well, I was getting ready."

"Sure you were."

He looked her over again. It did seem like a look that had taken some work. A very modern fashion statement. Not too flashy, just a light accent that blended in well with those around her.

"Wh-what?"

"Well, you look cute."

"D-don't call me cute!"

"Just stating the truth. You're cute."

"You did it again!"

"I'm docking points for the lack of miniskirt, but you've got the legs bare, so I'll forgive it."

"Quit staring at my legs!"

Tomoe crouched down, throwing her arms around her legs. Such a waste!

"They're fat anyway," she moaned, glaring up at him.

This just tickled his instinct to tease. His eyes lit upon her round, denim-covered butt.

“Don’t you dare say anything about my butt!” she warned, jumping ahead of him.

She was surprisingly on the ball.

“Why not?”

“It’s huge,” she moaned.

“Well, you’ll have beautiful babies one day.”

“Th-that’s the creepiest compliment ever!” she said, more rattled than he’d ever seen her. “I can’t believe you!”

She’d turned bright red and was starting to worry that people around them were listening.

“Where do you buy clothes like that?”

“Huh? Just, like, normal stores...”

“Which ones?”

“Why do you ask?”

“Once I get paid, I was thinking about buying some clothes for my sister.”

Mai had just told him to pay more attention to her clothing, and since Tomoe was closer to Kaede’s age, she might be a good reference.

“You’ve got a sister? How old is she?”

Tomoe sat down next to him.

“A year below you. She’s bigger than you, though.”

“I didn’t ask about her boobs!”

“I didn’t mean her boobs. Just her height.”

“I—I knew that... Oh, right, senpai, your ID!”

As if she’d just remembered something critical, Tomoe pulled her phone out of the pocket of her tote bag.

“Huh?”

“I went to warn you I was running late and realized I didn’t know your username,” Tomoe said, looking disgruntled.

“So that’s my fault somehow?”

“Being late is my fault. Sorry.”

She finally admitted it.

“Well, I’m not that upset about five minutes, one way or the other.”

“You sure sounded like it! Anyway, your ID.”

She showed him the registration screen.

“I don’t have one.”

“Huh?”

“No ID.”

“You don’t have this app?”

Like he was the last human on earth who didn’t.

If that was all it took to surprise her, she was in big trouble.

“I don’t even have a phone.”

“What?” She just blinked at him. “What does that mean?”

“I don’t own one.”

He raised both hands as if confessing. He’d thrown his phone into the ocean on the beach at Shichirigahama. The day he found out he’d passed the Minegahara entrance exams. To permanently cut Kaede off from anything online.

“Holy moly.”

“It’s true.”

“How do you even live?!”

“I was unaware a lack of phone was fatal.”

“Very!” she said firmly. “Wait, *are* you dead?”

She looked him over like she'd seen a zombie. She'd gone white as a sheet from sheer disbelief.

She started to say something else, but he ignored her. "Oh, here's the train," he observed and followed a beach-going family on board.

"Ah! Wait!"

She hastily scrambled after him.

The warning bell rang, and the doors slowly closed.

The train quietly rolled out. Sakuta and Tomoe sat side by side, bodies swaying.

For the first few minutes, Tomoe was still fuming about the phone thing, but by the time they reached Ishigami Station, she'd grown quiet.

The train lurched into motion again. Sakuta felt a weight on his shoulder. Tomoe was leaning against him. He glanced her way and found her mouth hanging half-open. She was asleep.

"Hey," he barked, giving her a light forehead flick.

"Ow!" Tomoe clutched her forehead with both hands, glaring at him.

"Who falls asleep that fast?"

"I didn't sleep much."

"Looking forward to our date?"

"Everyone was in a big group chat until after two...and then I was watching cute animal videos until morning. Then, I had to get ready for the date..."

She cupped her face with both hands, yawning. She quickly wiped a tear away before it ruined her makeup, pulling out a mirror to make sure it was okay.

"Yesterday was your first day working, right?"

"Mm."

"It wears you out, huh?"

Doing new things made people unusually tired.

"I was exhausted."

“Then you should have gone to sleep.”

“I can’t go to sleep when everyone else is still up!”

“You could have watched the animal videos another time.”

“Everyone else had already seen them, so it’d be a serious problem if I can’t join in the conversation when they come up! And Rena told me they were a must see.”

“Rena again?”

Keeping up with friends sure sounded like a lot of work.

“Oh, right! Gotta tell her what I thought.”

Tomoe pulled out her phone and activated the messaging function on a free call app. With practiced ease, she typed in a text about how great the videos were.

The reply was immediate.

He glanced at her screen, and it was another recommended link. Tomoe would be losing sleep again tonight, he thought.

But instead, she immediately started watching the video. Some dumb panda tripping over itself on her tiny little screen. Legs splayed out to either side, crotch exposed.

The train reached their destination, Enoshima Station, before the video finished. Tomoe was too absorbed to notice.

“Come on, we gotta get off here.” Sakuta interrupted, pulling her by the arm.

Enoshima Station was one of the largest Enoden stops. This was where you changed to the Shonan Monorail. And it was a short walk to the Odakyu Enoshima Line’s Katase-Enoshima Station, which was modeled after the Dragon Palace from the famous “Urashima Taro” legend. But neither station was actually on the island of Enoshima. They were merely close.

Sakuta and Tomoe left the station and headed south. Toward the ocean. The wind carried the smells of summer.

They were walking down Subana Street, a road paved with stones laid out like

bricks. There were rows of shops and fancy cafés, and on weekends, it was pretty packed. There were lots of couples today.

“Couples everywhere!”

“It is a Sunday.”

“We look like one, right?”

“I doubt it.”

“Why not?”

“Well...”

Sakuta eyed the distance between them. Tomoe was walking a good three feet from him. On a road this narrow, they didn’t even look like they knew each other. Quite a lot of people were passing between them. If they looked like a couple, people would be going around.

Realizing what his glance meant, Tomoe stepped closer. Moving from just over three feet to just under.

“This far?”

“That far.” Sakuta pointed at the college couple ahead of them. Their shoulders were almost touching.

Tomoe finally moved next to him.

“Then we gotta act like them,” Sakuta said, pointing at a couple their age who were pouring over the menu at a sidewalk café.

The girl was holding her boyfriend’s fingers—but just two of them. The little finger and the ring finger.

“You’ve dated boys before, so that much is no big deal, right?”

“R-right.”

Tomoe gingerly extended her hand. But instead of taking Sakuta’s, she grabbed something else—the extra bit of belt dangling from his waist.

Her relationship with her last boyfriend must have been super pure. Assuming the guys had ever existed in the first place.

She was staring bashfully at the ground. This was clearly the most she could manage.

Given her small stature, this whole thing did look weirdly cute. There was only one problem.

“I feel like I’m your dog.”

“Oh, we have a dog!”

“We’ve got a cat. But in all seriousness, there’s no real need to force ourselves to act intimate.”

Maybe at school, but what use was it fooling strangers in a crowd?

“Well...there might be,” Tomoe said, awkwardly avoiding his gaze. “So, uh...I have a small confession to make.”

They reached the end of the brick road, and the sea spread out before them.

Floating on those waters was their destination, Enoshima. A small land-tied island sticking out in the middle of the bow-like curve of Sagami Bay. To the west lay Odawara and Hakone, so if the weather was clear, you could even see Mount Fuji. Today it was cloudy, though, and you could only just make out the outline.

“This about the three girls following us?”

He’d felt eyes on him since they reached Enoshima Station. He’d checked behind him while pretending to look at Tomoe and spotted Rena and her two friends, Hinako and Aya.

“You noticed?”

“You were acting suspicious.”

“I—I was?”

This was not gonna be a simple matter of taking pictures that looked like memories of their date. If Tomoe’s friends were watching the whole time, they had to nail the whole “more than a senpai, less than a boyfriend” vibe the entire time.

“Rena said she had to pass judgment on you.”

“She seemed to have her doubts about me yesterday.”

Not about whether they were lying, but about Sakuta’s tact and basic humanity. After asking Mai out in front of the entire school a month ago, jumping ship to Tomoe this fast was definitely cause for alarm. It made sense that Rena would be worried about her friend.

“Friendship is a beautiful thing.”

“You make that sound spiteful.”

Those friendships were making this way worse, so he thought he’d earned the right.

Honestly, knowing they were watching made him uncomfortable playing the clown. Those girls seemed sure they wouldn’t get spotted, but it was the role of any senpai to teach a kohai how harsh life could be.

“Koga, change of plans.”

“Huh? Whoa!”

He grabbed Tomoe’s arm and pulled her along Route 134, putting Shichirigahama at their backs and crossing the bridge over the Sakai River where it flowed into the sea.

“What are we doing?” Tomoe asked, totally lost.

“Going there,” Sakuta said.

He pointed at a big square building on the opposite bank—the aquarium.

Sakuta and Tomoe bought tickets and went inside. There, they were greeted by a variety of sea creatures found right here in Sagami Bay. The animals were swimming all around a giant tank that stretched to the floor below. Sharks with triangular heads. Tasty-looking sea breams. Sea turtles elegantly circling the tank. Two rays passed by together, showing their bellies—which looked like faces. A school of over a thousand pilchards formed a bizarre sphere at the center of the tank as they circled themselves.

Small children were plastered to the glass, absorbed by sea life in action. Tomoe joined the outer edge of this group, securing herself a first-rate position. A huge shark passed right in front of her.

“Eep!”

Tomoe let out an adorable little shriek and fell backward onto her butt. Since Sakuta had been standing behind her, this meant she’d planted her magnificent behind right on his feet.

Since Rena’s group was watching, he helped her up like a proper boyfriend.

He had hoped the entrance fee would discourage her friends from following them, but no such luck. But being inside did constrict their movements significantly, so he was waiting for his chance to turn the tables on them. Sakuta was not nearly nice enough to let himself remain a spectacle.

After enjoying the big tank for a while, Tomoe and Sakuta followed the path farther in.

Colorful fish from tropical climes. Strange creatures from the ocean depths. The lights in the jellyfish area were lowered, making it feel like a planetarium.

He saw couples stopping to take pictures.

A jellyfish wafted slowly by.

“So cute!” Tomoe gushed, taking out her phone and snapping a picture.

Another jellyfish looked like it was made of candy.

“It’s like a macaron!” Tomoe said, clearly thinking along similar lines. “Senpai, take a shot!”

She pushed her phone into his hands, and he got her and the jellyfish in the frame together.

“No, not like that!” she said. She shot a meaningful glance at the couple farther down who were standing shoulder to shoulder against the tank. The boy had his arm stretched out, getting both of them in the shot.

Sakuta did as she asked and bumped shoulders. This slight contact made her jump. He glanced sideways and saw her looking super tense.

He pressed the button anyway.

They looked at the resulting picture, and Tomoe was *clearly* super nervous.

“Senpai, you have dead eyes.”

“I always look like that.”

“Then your eyes are always dead.”

The laughter seemed to relax her.

They moved on down the corridor, sensing a crowd ahead. People were packed into one corner of the aquarium.

There were a bunch of Humboldt penguins on a re-creation of a rocky coast.

A caretaker with a headset mic was standing in the exhibit—clearly in the middle of a show.

“Wanna watch?”

“Mm!”

The caretaker was explaining the unique characteristics of the Humboldt penguin. Apparently, the patterns on their chests are always unique, but there are resemblances between family members. The keeper picked up a penguin, showing it to everyone.

The other penguins were gathering around his feet. If he stepped to the right, they all shuffled right. If he stepped left, they all shuffled left.

People up and down the crowd were whispering “Cute!”

“They *are* cute! Really cute!” Tomoe beamed, her eyes sparkling.

As cute as they were on land, it seemed like they were about to show off how badass they could be while swimming. Sakuta wondered how, but the caretaker just threw a small fish into the water.

The penguins all dove in. Rocketing through the water like bullets. It was like they were flying. Penguins can’t fly in the air but totally can underwater.

“Check out that one...”

“Hmm?”

Tomoe was looking toward the corner of the rocks.

One penguin was taking a leisurely nap, totally ignoring the others jostling for fish.

“It’s just like you, senpai.”

“Are my legs that short?”

“The way everyone else is joining in the show, but he can’t be bothered.”

“So you’re more like that cheery penguin second from the front?”

That made the one in front Rena Kashiba. The same four penguins were getting all the fish the caretaker tossed in. Penguin society has hierarchies, too.

“No, I’m more like that one, following everyone around from the back,” Tomoe said softly.

“It *does* have a big butt.”

“I was being serious!” Tomoe yelped, claspig her butt with both hands. She glared up at him. This was a very penguin-like gesture.

“Why isn’t that penguin with the others?” she wondered.

The corner penguin had woken up and was slowly looking around. The caretaker noticed and said, “You finally woke up? The show’s already over!”

But the penguin didn’t seem to care. It went back to sleep. The audience laughed.

“He doesn’t care if everyone’s laughing... He really is *just* like you,” Tomoe repeated, as if she’d scored a major victory.

The penguin show drew to a successful close.

The crowd began spreading out.

Sakuta left Tomoe by a nearby sea lion tank, saying he needed to hit the restroom. He walked away.

But instead of hitting the restrooms, he made a big loop of the aquarium. He’d located Rena, Hinako, and Aya during the penguin show.

He went all the way back to the entrance, then followed the path they’d taken. He found the girls hiding near the gift shop. Watching Tomoe watch the sea lions.

He came up behind them and said, “I found some rare fish!”

Hinako and Aya both jumped. Rena kept her cool, turning to face him.

“Fancy meeting you here,” she said.

He was impressed.

“Schoolgirls these days sure have a lot of time on their hands.”

“We’re very busy.”

“You don’t look it.”

“Are you sure you should be neglecting Tomoe?”

“Augh, see?” Hinako said. She was wearing those fake-looking glasses again.

Hinako pointed past the pillar at Tomoe.

Sakuta looked as well.

Two men had come up to Tomoe. Both had their hair dyed brown. Both had wallet chains dangling at their sides and were wearing sandals.

They were probably inviting her to watch the dolphin show with them. One was pointing at the exit.

“They look a little scary.”

Tomoe waved a hand in front of her, but one of the men grabbed her wrist.

“Should we do something?” Hinako asked, turning to Rena.

But Sakuta was already moving past her. He walked up to Tomoe and bonked her on the head. “I take my eyes off you for a minute, and you’re already getting picked up?” he accused. Then, he put an arm around her shoulders, pulling her away from the creeps.

“You had a boyfriend?” one called after them, sounding annoyed.

“You were in the bathroom forever!” Tomoe said quietly.

“Number two,” he said. Not at all what he’d been up to, but this was enough to send the brown-haired duo packing.

“You took a dump on a date?” one laughed. They moved on.

Sakuta glanced after them. “None of your friends had crushes on them,

right?” he whispered.

“Of course not!” Tomoe hissed.

“Then just say you aren’t interested.”

“I know, but...”

“But what?”

“I wasn’t expecting anyone to hit on me! I got all rattled.”

“You should probably get used to it.”

The beaches were opening next week. The entire area would be filled with people hunting for love.

“Why me?”

“Have you looked at yourself in a mirror?”

“Every day!”

Tomoe looked at her reflection in the side of the tank.

“What do you think?” he asked.

“...It’s like it isn’t me,” Tomoe said, staring at the floor.

2

Having left the aquarium, Sakuta and Tomoe were now on the Benten Bridge leading to Enoshima itself.

The sounds of the wind and waves and the smell of the sea enveloped them. They weren’t that high above the water’s surface, so it felt like they were walking across the ocean.

Halfway to their destination, Sakuta paused, looking back. Tomoe had been about three steps behind him, so she stopped, too.

Tomoe looked downcast. Ever since they left the aquarium, she’d seemed lost in thought.

“Are we pretending I’m a domineering husband?”

“No.”

“Maybe a couple that can’t be seen together?”

Tomoe slowly stepped closer to him.

At his side, she put her hands on the rail and sighed. The sun was setting behind the clouds, turning her face red.

“I told you I’m from Fukuoka, right?”

“Bragging about home?”

“No.”

“Then what?” Sakuta asked, turning and leaning his back on the rail.

“I wasn’t like this in junior high,” Tomoe said, staring at the water. “Wanna see a picture?”

“Not interested.”

“Here.” She held out her phone anyway.

Seemed like he didn’t have a choice.

She was wearing an old-style sailor uniform. Skirt frumpily worn below the knees. Her hair was in two braided pigtails.

“Wow...you were a total hick.”

“This is why I didn’t want to show you!”

“You forced me to look!”

“My dad got transferred, so we had to move to Tokyo.”

“This is Kanagawa.”

“Semantics! It’s basically Tokyo.”

“Sure, fine.”

“I wasn’t in a main group in class or anything.”

“Hmm.”

“But I thought if I wasn’t cool, I’d never make friends in the city. I was scared I’d get bullied.”

“Things like that do happen.”

“We learned about Dad’s transfer at the beginning of January, so I spent three months doing a lot of research.” Tomoe reached up and touched her hair. “I started with makeup. I went to a fancy salon and changed my hairstyle. I read a lot of fashion magazines and copied the looks in them. I practiced talking without the accent...and turned into this.”

“You’re not happy with it?”

“Huh?”

“The new you.”

Tomoe thought about it. After a while she said, “I do like it. A lot.” As if she was taking an inventory of her own feelings.

“So what are you worried about? It’s ridiculous.”

“R-ridiculous?”

“You’re just doing the whole peak of puberty, ‘This isn’t the real me!’ thing, right?”

“W-well, kinda...”

“It sucks!”

“You’re so mean!”

“But I think that’s fine.”

“What is?”

“This is you. However you used to be, you are the way you are.”

“How would you know?!” She glared at him as if he was clueless.

“Whatever the reason for it, you’re like this because you worked hard to be.”

“R-right...”

“And you enjoy being this way.”

“Mm.”

“Then it makes no sense to say it isn’t you.”

“.....”

“So quit worrying about it!”

“.....I don’t like it.”

“Huh?”

“I feel like you’re conning me.”

“Look...” He was about to complain, but Tomoe was looking at her phone.

“Oh...it’s from Rena,” she said, opening a message.

“What’s she say?”

““You look good together. He’s a better man than I thought.””

“She finally saw the light.”

“I’m telling her you said that.”

“Don’t!”

“Already sent. She just responded, ‘Pfft.’”

“Right...”

Getting stuck in the middle of a high school girl’s conversation was wearing him out.

“Well, let’s get ourselves to Enoshima.”

“Mm... Oh, wait.” Tomoe’s attention was suddenly focused on the beach next to the bridge. With the sun setting, the crowds had thinned, but there was someone on the beach, staring at the ground like they were searching for something. Based on the build, it was a girl.

“That’s Yoneyama.”

“You know her?”

“Nana Yoneyama, from my class.”

Tomoe had actually learned the girl’s full name. Sakuta only knew the family names of the vast majority of his classmates.

Tomoe turned her back on Enoshima and retraced her steps along Benten

Bridge. She left the road, heading down the beach. Sakuta didn't see the point in going to Enoshima alone, so he followed.

As they drew near the shore, he got a better look at Nana Yoneyama. Black-rimmed glasses. Her hair was parted like a junior high school girl's, hanging down in front of her shoulders. Her skirt went below the knees, and she wore a navy-blue cardigan. She was small, like Tomoe, and seemed like the shy and quiet type. Would feel right at home in a library.

Nana pacing up and down the beach, looking ready to cry.

"Yoneyama," Tomoe said.

Nana's body quivered, frightened.

She looked up, saw Tomoe, and flinched again.

"Did you do something to her? She seems pretty scared," Sakuta observed quietly.

"I—I didn't do anything!" Tomoe whispered.

"Koga...and the senpai who looped back around. Why...?"

"Do *all* the first-years say that about me?"

When Sakuta's eyes met hers, Nana looked even more frightened.

"S-sorry," she said.

"What did *you* do, senpai?" Tomoe seized her chance to turn the tables on him.

"Nothing. Yet."

"Well, don't do anything in the future, either!" She glared, then turned back to Nana. "Yoneyama, what's wrong?" she asked.

"Oh, nothing...", said the girl. *Clearly* there was something.

"Looking for something?" Tomoe tried.

"M-mm." Nana bobbed her head.

Rather than any bad blood between them, it seemed Nana was just shy and, since she'd never really spoken to Tomoe before, surprised by this interaction.

Sakuta and his history of dubious rumors only made it harder for her.

“I’ll help look! What’d you lose?”

“O-oh, I couldn’t. You’re in Kashiba’s group, after all.”

That was a fascinatingly specific reason, Sakuta thought.

One that clearly sketched in the power balance in Tomoe’s class.

Nana Yoneyama was clearly on the mousey side. Totally not a match for Tomoe’s modern aura or the other members of Rena’s clique. Which made this awkward for her.

He wanted to tell her that Tomoe had been even worse back in junior high.

But he’d just finished praising the work Tomoe had put into her transformation, so he decided it would be best to resist the urge.

“Three’s better than one,” Sakuta offered, looking around, though unsure what he was looking for.

“See, even he wants to help.”

“O-okay... It’s a phone strap.”

“What kind?”

“There’s a little jellyfish on it. From the aquarium gift shop.”

“What color?”

“It’s transparent, but maybe a little bluish?”

“This is important to you?”

“Yeah...my friends and I all bought matching ones over Golden Week.”

It would certainly suck to be the only one who’d lost that.

And she couldn’t just go buy a replacement. To Nana, what mattered was that they’d all bought these together.

“Are you sure you dropped it here?”

“S-sorry, I’m not sure.”

“No need to apologize.” Sakuta waved her off. He kept his eyes down, afraid

meeting her gaze would just scare her again. Having someone this spooked by him was demoralizing.

“He’s a weirdo, but he isn’t scary,” Tomoe said.

How rude. Sakuta thought Tomoe was plenty weird herself.

“M-mm...”

Nana was still clearly keeping her distance from both of them.

With this mild tension lingering, the three of them searched for nearly half an hour without finding any sign of the jellyfish strap. The sun was almost gone, and further searching would be difficult.

And since they barely knew one another, they could only keep this going for so long.

Just as Sakuta was sure they were out of time, his eye caught something shiny at the edge of the water.

When the waves withdrew, he saw a jellyfish strap lying on the wet sand.

“Found it!” he called out.

“Really?” Tomoe and Nana came running.

Sakuta tried to pick it up, but the next wave rolled in, so he jumped back. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw someone else dive straight in.

“Ah! Koga!” Nana cried, trying to stop her, but Tomoe leaned forward, plunging both hands into the water. A moment later, a huge wave washed right over her.

“Yikes!” She shrieked, losing her balance and falling over. She was completely drenched.

“Everything okay?” Sakuta asked.

She turned back, grinning. “Don’t worry!” she chirped, holding up the strap.

He’d been worried about Tomoe, not the strap, but apparently, that had been lost on her.

“Are you okay, Koga?” Nana asked.

She didn't look okay. She was clearly soaked all the way to her underwear. The white blouse was clinging to her, and Sakuta could see the colors of her bra and skin through it.

Sakuta stepped into the water, shoes still on, and helped her up. Tomoe's feet caught on the sand, and she staggered against him.

"Whoa, stay back! You'll get me wet!"

"Y-you're supposed to be happy, here!"

"Your eyebrows are melting off."

"Augh! Don't look!"

Tomoe shielded her face. But that was hardly the only place she needed to hide.

"Your shirt's gone see-through, so better cover that first."

"Augh! I don't have enough hands!"

"I'd be happy to lend you mine," he suggested.

Tomoe thought about this for a second.

"Wait, no! That's completely out of line!"

By this point, Nana was laughing out loud.

3

The day after his date with Tomoe—Monday, June 30—arrived safely.

Maybe there would be no more loops. Maybe they'd resolved the Adolescence Syndrome.

Mulling that over, Sakuta headed to school...and ran into Tomoe on the Enoden Fujisawa Station platform.

With all the Minegahara students around them, they couldn't pretend not to know each other. He was supposed to be "more than a senpai, less than a boyfriend," after all. They needed to act accordingly. With that in mind, he suggested, "Should we head in together, Koga?"

“Mm.” She nodded. Her voice was hoarse, and he could barely make it out.

He leaned over, stealing a better look. Her face was flushed.

“You getting sick?”

Getting drenched in seawater would do that. They couldn’t exactly get on a train with her dripping, so they’d had to walk all the way back to Fujisawa, a nearly two-mile hike.

Even in summer, that could take its toll.

“I’m fine,” she insisted, but her eyes were glazed over. She didn’t even have the energy to look up. Even breathing seemed like a struggle.

“You really don’t look fine,” said Sakuta, putting a hand on her forehead. She was burning up. If he’d had a fever like this, he would have gladly called in sick. But when the train pulled in, Tomoe hopped right on board.

He put her down in an empty seat.

“We’re getting off at the next station and turning back.”

“Don’t wanna.” She pouted like a small child.

“You love school that much?”

“If I miss a day, I won’t know what anyone’s talking about.”

“It’s just one day.”

“That’s all it takes to end you.”

What an exhausting schedule.

“Then nap until we get to the station. I’ll wake you.”

“Thanks,” Tomoe said, sounding relieved. Her eyes closed.

He ended up escorting Tomoe to school. She struggled to change into slippers in the entrance, though, so he force-marched her to the nurse’s office. He left her in the nurse’s care.

As he left, he heard a raspy voice hiss, “Traitor!” He ignored this.

At lunch, he ducked out of school, heading for a nearby convenience store. He got his shopping done and was back before any teachers caught him. Then, he

poked his head in the nurse's office.

Tomoe was lying on a bed. Rena, Hinako, and Aya were gathered around her.

When the three of them saw Sakuta, they all grinned and left, saying, "Take your time!"

Seemed like the nurse was busy somewhere else.

So it was just the two of them.

"Feeling better?" Sakuta asked, settling on a stool by the bed.

"Mm," Tomoe murmured faintly. Her voice sounded better than it had that morning.

"Want some canned tangerines?" Sakuta offered, putting the convenience store bag on the bed's table.

"Slipping out in the middle of the day is against the school rules."

"You don't want 'em?" He pulled the can out of the bag.

"I do," Tomoe said, reaching for them.

He played keep-away. "Hold your horses."

"Whyyy? Ya bought it for me, yeah?"

Sakuta pulled a plastic container full of crushed ice out of the bag.

"Ice?" Tomoe blinked at him.

Sakuta ignored the question. He put the ice in some water, then dumped the can in, too, swirling it around.

"Whatcha doin', senpai?"

He was imitating a quick cooling technique Rio had shown him.

He took the can out after a couple of minutes, opened the lid, and put it in front of Tomoe.

"Or would you prefer I feed them to you?"

"That would just make it harder."

She took the convenience store fork and ate a bite.

“Wow, that’s super cold,” she said, grinning happily. Then she caught him staring. “Don’t watch me eat!”

“Why?”

“It’s embarrassing.”

“Again, why?”

Sakuta’s confusion deepened, but he hadn’t come here to upset a sick kohai. He stood up and opened the window.

A salty breeze drifted into the air-conditioned room.

“Oh! I can smell the sea!”

Tomoe closed her eyes, letting the wind wash over her.

She sat like that for a while.

Then she said, “Senpai.”

“Mm?” he said, leaning out the window.

“Why did you agree to my ridiculous request?”

“You mean the ‘more than a senpai, less than a boyfriend’ thing?”

“I mean that thing.”

On the Shichirigahama beach, he could see a ton of surfboards in the waves.

“You seemed pretty desperate.”

“You barely know me, though.”

“But we have kicked each other’s asses.”

“Argh, will you be serious?”

He glanced over his shoulder and found her sulking around a fork in her mouth.

“But I knew then you were a good person, Koga.”

She’d delivered a vicious kick to Sakuta’s posterior because she’d thought he was attacking a small child. She’d been wrong, but not everyone had the courage to take action like that. And this side of Tomoe had come through again

the day before, when she helped Nana Yoneyama find her phone strap.

“Is that why you’re helping?”

“Well, also because you’re cute.”

“Again with the jokes.”

“I dunno if I’d have done the same if you were ugly. Just a sad truth about men.”

“...I bet you would have,” she said, so softly Sakuta decided to pretend he hadn’t heard it.

“I’m not nice enough to be nice to just anybody,” he said.

“But you make up for it by being way nicer to a select few.”

“Well, I do want *some* people to think I’m a good guy.”

“Hmm.”

She seemed unconvinced but was disinclined to press the point further. She finished eating the tangerines and drank the liquid they’d been soaking in.

“You in love with anyone, Koga?”

“Huh?!” she spluttered, clearly rattled by this sudden question. “Wh-why would you ask that?!”

“If there’s someone you’re crushing on, wouldn’t rumors about you dating me get in the way of that?”

“I’m not crushing on anyone. Don’t worry.”

“Not even anyone you’re interested in?”

“Nope.”

“Huh. Such a waste.”

“I just don’t have time for that right now.”

“Too busy watching all the videos your friends send around?”

“Now you’re being mean.”

“It sounds mean because you know it’s a problem yourself.”

“How so?”

“If you didn’t have any doubts about it, you’d dismiss me out of hand.”

“.....”

Her silence signaled agreement.

“You’re right,” Tomoe said after a while. “I care a lot about what people think of me. Even now, I’m wondering what they’re thinking about me spending the whole day in the nurse’s office.”

“That’s a bit too self-conscious, Koga.”

“I think you’re the weird one, senpai. How can you just come to school like this when everyone thinks you’re a weirdo? When everyone’s laughing at you? How do you go on living? How does it not bother you?”

“I can’t believe you’d say that to my face.”

“Urp...sorry.”

“But it’s not like that bothered me, either.”

“Then I’m not sorry,” Tomoe whispered.

But the look she was giving Sakuta was very serious. She clearly wanted a real answer.

Fine. Keeping his eyes on the view outside, Sakuta answered, as if talking to himself.

“It’s not like the point of life is to have everyone like you.”

“I *do* want everyone to like me. Or at least...not hate me.”

“I’m fine with it being just one person. If that one person needs me, I can go on living.”

He opened the packaging on an *onigiri* he’d bought for himself. Pushing the seaweed back in place, he took a bite. Lunch tasted better with an ocean view. This alone made picking this school worthwhile.

“Even if the whole world hates you?”

“I’d still be happy.”

“Would you?”

“You’ll get it someday,” he said. This conversation was getting increasingly awkward, so he wanted to wrap it up.

“Ugh, so smug!” Tomoe complained, puffing out her cheeks like a small child. When Sakuta laughed at this, she let them deflate. She must have realized it only encouraged him to treat her like a kid.

On her first day of work, he’d thought she wasn’t particularly on the ball, but talking with her like this, she was having no trouble following what he said, catching both the surface meaning and the meaning behind it.

It was more like Tomoe’s attention was always focused on her surroundings, trying not to miss anything. Taken in a positive light, she read the air well. On the negative side, she was *too* focused on reading the room and she always acted in a way that matched that dynamic. Her makeup, hairstyle, and fashion choices were all perfect examples.

Even her fake boyfriend was an extension of this.

She was good at living a life without conflict or even minor frictions. Working hard to avoid making waves. Constantly on edge to prevent problems before they happened.

Sakuta could never live like that. It just sounded exhausting.

“Are you thinking rude things?”

“Not really.”

“You totally were.”

“Kinda the opposite.”

“What does that mean?”

Sakuta ignored this, asking her a question instead.

“Koga, if you fell in love with the same person as Rena, what would you do?”

He could imagine her answer but asked anyway because he wanted Tomoe to reach the same realization.

Not all friction could be avoided. Doing so would just grind away at you

instead.

“If that happened, I’d absolutely never let Rena know.”

“What if you liked the same person as Hinako?”

“I wouldn’t tell her.”

“Or Aya?”

“Same.”

“You’d just give up, then.”

“I think so.”

“I figured as much.”

“Then don’t ask.”

Giving up was fine as long as you still could. If the emotions were only that strong, it was all okay. But he figured she’d be in trouble if the feelings were strong enough that she couldn’t let them go. The answer Tomoe had just given would leave her trapped. And he thought there was a real danger of that happening.

“You’re a child.”

“D-don’t treat me like a kid!”

“I think that response proves you are.”

“Urp... Oh, right. Senpai. That reminds me...”

“Mm?”

“What happened with Sakurajima?”

“Still waiting for her answer.”

“Huh? She still hasn’t said no?!”

“If the loop phenomenon hadn’t happened, I’d have been officially dating her after lunch that day.”

“You’re kidding?!”

“Swear to god.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Why not?”

“I mean, we’re talking about Sakurajima?! The famous Mai Sakurajima? *The* Mai Sakurajima?!”

“Yeah.”

“Sakurajima said she loved you?” Tomoe gave him a deeply suspicious look.

“Well...not in so many words.”

“See? You just imagined it.”

It was a fact that Mai had never specifically said “I love you.” It was a fact that he really wanted her to say that to him. That would make their relationship feel so much more definitive.

And Tomoe rubbing it in like this meant it was really bugging him now. Did Mai really love him? After an entire month of asking her out, it was more like she was past caring. And even then, she’d just ignored his declarations. He felt almost like she’d just given up on rebuffing his advances.

And that left him feeling very uncomfortable.

“The next time I ask her out, I’ll do my best to make her say that.”

“She’s totally gonna blow you off.”

Tomoe was very sure of this.

“Well, either way, first we finish out this term.”

They just had to fool the entire student body until then.

If they couldn’t get through it, neither Sakuta nor Tomoe had a bright future waiting for them.

“...Mm.”

Fortunately, there was no sign of Rena catching on. At this rate, they should be able to last the next three weeks. The wild card in the picture was Maesawa.

Whether he believed Sakuta and Tomoe were dating or not, he might decide to ask her out anyway or do something else to clue Rena in to what was going

on. If that happened, they were sunk. Rena could never find out he'd been interested in Tomoe.

Sakuta found it hard to be optimistic.

4

The next day was Tuesday. Flip the calendar—it was the first day of July. Having come to school with a fever and spending the entire day in the nurse's office, Tomoe had learned her lesson and stayed home.

But by Wednesday, she was fully recovered, and at lunch, she brought a can of peaches to Class 2-1.

The eyes of everyone eating in the classroom locked onto the can, clearly wondering, "Why peaches?"

Presumably, this was to pay him back for the tangerines.

Well aware of the reason, Sakuta elected to tease her instead.

"Because you've got a peach butt?" he asked.

"No perving!" she snapped, pursing her lips.

"Well, I'll feast on these tonight, thinking of you," he said, doubling down.

Tomoe snatched the can out of his hands.

"D-dumbass!" she squeaked and fled the room.

"Maybe I went a bit too far."

He'd have to do a better job toeing the line next time.

There were a lot of people staring at him. The girls ripe with scorn, like, "Sexual harassment? So gross." And the boys enviously, "Flirting in front of everyone!" None of them seemed at all surprised that Sakuta and Tomoe were together.

All hail the wireless age. Rumors about them had clearly spread through the entire school already.

Tomoe was still mad at him after school that day. They were working the

same shift, so they were both at the restaurant, but every time their paths crossed, she hid her butt and glared at him like he'd murdered her parents.

But unfortunately, this was not the least bit intimidating.

By eight, the dinner rush began slowing down. The flow of customers entering ebbed, and everyone seated had their orders taken. Most had their food, too.

Sakuta was standing by the register when Tomoe came over.

"There's just one thing I want to make clear," she began.

"I know I've got no tact."

"I've given up on that."

"Then what?"

"....."

The way she looked at him really made him squirm.

This felt like it was gonna be a big deal.

"My butt *isn't* that big," she insisted.

Not exactly what he'd expected.

"Such modesty!" he said, patting her shoulder as if comforting her.

"Wrong response!"

"You should have more confidence."

"In what?!"

"Your peach butt."

"I don't have one! That's my whole point!"

"No, no, don't deny it!"

"Argh, I should never have tried talking to you!"

Seemingly really mad this time, she stalked away.

But less than a minute later, she took a drink order that was new to her and was forced to come to him for help.

“What do I do with beer?” she asked awkwardly.

“.....”

Sakuta pretended not to hear her as he refilled the glasses at the beverage counter.

“Don’t ignore me!” she wailed, tugging at his apron.

“.....”

“P-please! Help me out!” Tomoe was starting to tear up. “I—I promise I’ll be prouder of my butt.”

When he heard that, Sakuta finally met her gaze.

“You admit it’s a peach?”

“F-fine! I admit it! I’ve got a peach butt!”

She was clearly past caring.

“Well, then fine. Let me show you how.”

“You’re so mean!”

Sakuta kept teasing Tomoe until their shifts ended at nine. He then walked her home before returning to his own apartment by nine thirty.

Kaede was just coming out of the bath, so he took her place, washing off the sweat of the day.

He emerged feeling refreshed.

Wearing only his underwear, Sakuta got a sports drink out of the fridge, poured a glass, and drained it. A refreshing chill spread through his still warm body. He’d always liked this particular sports drink, but now that Mai was in the commercials for it, it tasted even better. Every sip he took reminded him of her.

Mai was in Kagoshima shooting a TV show this week.

It was past ten, but she might still be working. Or was she back in her hotel by now? It was hard to tell with her line of work.

He poured himself a second glass. This time he took it slow, drinking it in three gulps.

Once he finished, he washed the glass and put it on the drying rack. The phone rang.

He quickly dried his hands and picked up.

"Yes, Azusagawa speaking."

"It's me."

He knew who it was immediately.

"Mai, how are you?"

"I figured you'd want to hear my voice by now."

"I was just thinking about you."

"You'd better have underwear on."

She had clearly jumped to the wrong conclusion.

"I'm well aware you think of me that way, but..."

Apparently, she'd assumed he was taking action.

"I am wearing underwear. Just underwear."

"Huh? Why just underwear?"

"I just got out of the bath."

"Oh. What a normal reason."

Was that a bad thing?

"Well, if I find myself tossing and turning, I may need your help, then."

"Fine, fine, go right ahead."

He'd thought she'd get flustered, but she just brushed him off.

"How are things on your end?" she asked.

"I dunno, same as always."

"Enjoying dates with your cute girlfriend?"

"They're all right."

Tomoe's reactions were pretty amusing.

“Hmph.” Mai did *not* sound amused.

“What was the right answer to that question?”

“You want to run away and come see me in Kagoshima.”

“Sweep you up in my arms?”

“That’d be a bit much.” She sounded annoyed. Was it such a bad idea?

“What about you, Mai? Up to anything besides filming?”

“I ate some polar bear.”

“How carnivorous.”

“It’s a type of shaved ice.”

“I actually knew that. That’s the one with fruit on top, right?”

“How dull.”

The queen was not being fair tonight.

But her tone was lively, and she seemed enthused about something. Maybe just excited to be acting again.

“You enjoying the shoot?”

“I am!” The answer came right away. “Sakuta, do you know what you want to do?”

“Most high school students haven’t worked that out yet.”

“Shame.”

“I’d like to be Santa Claus.”

“Because you get three hundred sixty-four days off?”

“That obvious?”

“Saying dumb stuff will make you dumb. Good night.”

“Uh, right, good night.”

Sakuta waited until Mai hung up, then put the receiver back on the hook.

That weekend, the weather service officially confirmed the end of the rainy season in the Kanto region. Summer was finally here. The real heat was on its way, and with the beaches opening next week, the area around the coast sprang to life.

Sakuta spotted a number of groups of bored-looking college students dropping in to hang out, and the number of surfers in the waters at Shichirigahama increased on a daily basis.

While blue skies and seas might be the symbols of the season, Sakuta and Tomoe were keeping their gray-area lie going strong. Both were doing a good job simulating the awkward distance between any new couple.

There was no need to force themselves to be together. Even on the way to school, they only met up if their schedules happened to align.

This allowed Tomoe to prioritize time with her friends.

Seemed like everyone in school knew about their relationship now, and Sakuta could tell his classmates were dying to know more.

But despite their evident curiosity, no one worked up the courage to actually ask.

So no one suspected they might be faking it.

Why would they? Normally, no one would go to the trouble of fooling their classmates like this, and it wasn't like anyone ever verified the truth behind the latest gossip. Nobody was that interested in anyone else's business. That level of disinterest played to Sakuta's advantage this time.

It meant he didn't have to worry about getting caught in a lie.

But an entirely different concern still plagued him.

The Adolescence Syndrome Tomoe had caused. They still hadn't addressed the root problem.

This left Sakuta checking the digital clock by his bed first thing every morning. It was part of his daily routine now.

So far, no days had repeated since June 27, but he couldn't be sure it wouldn't happen again. He never felt safe.

This anxiety stayed with him all week. It was July 5, exactly a week since he'd escaped the first loop.

Sakuta waited for school to end, then swung by the science classroom.

"Futaba, you here?" he called, sliding the door open.

He found her in her lab coat at the window, talking to someone outside. Someone in a T-shirt and knee-length sweat shorts. Yuuma. He had a basketball in one hand. Must have been on his way to practice.

Both turned to stare at the door. Sakuta looked from one to the other.

"Sorry to interrupt," he apologized. He turned around and left, closing the door behind him.

He'd been planning on getting Rio's help with the Adolescence Syndrome, but it seemed best to leave that for another day. Before he got far, though, the door slammed open behind him.



He looked back and saw a very flustered Rio.

“Are you a total idiot, Azusagawa?!” she hissed. “Are you genuinely stupid?!”

She seemed very conscious of Yuuma’s gaze. He was still outside the window, spinning the basketball on his finger.

“Well, I’m definitely dumber than you,” Sakuta admitted.

“Don’t try to help me out! Kunimi might notice!”

“If he was capable of figuring it out from something like this, he already knows how you feel.”

There was a strong possibility Yuuma was just pretending he hadn’t.

“That...would suck,” Rio said, barely getting the words out. She was turning visibly red.

Teasing her any further seemed like a bad idea, so Sakuta stepped past her into the lab.

“We were just talking about you,” Yuuma said as his friend approached the window.

“Talking about me behind my back? How cruel.”

Yuuma ignored this attempt at humor.

“Is it true you’re dating Koga now?” he asked.

“It is.”

“Seriously?”

“I mean, we’re still just trying it out.”

“Hmph.”

Yuuma seemed unconvinced. When Rio caught up with him, she seemed equally suspicious. Rio likely had a hunch what was really going on. He’d already told her Tomoe was Laplace’s demon when they were discussing the current Adolescence Syndrome phenomenon.

But she didn’t pry further.

“Well, then I oughtta at least warn you,” Yuuma said, dribbling the ball. “About Koga...”

He paused dramatically.

“What?”

“There’s some ugly rumors.”

“About her taste in men?”

Considering Sakuta’s reputation, that seemed pretty likely. The first-years might think he’d looped around to good again, but the second-and third-years still seemed stuck on the hospitalization incident. Once you got a label like that stuck on you, even if you tore it off, the mark remained.

“Like she’s easy or a slut or sleeping with you.”

Yuuma lowered his voice a bit, possibly in deference to Rio. Picking up on it, she refrained from directly participating, though she was clearly listening.

“What?” This was the first Sakuta’d heard of this.

“It came up in the men’s basketball team group chat.”

That explained it.

“You asked about Yousuke the other day at work, right?” Yuuma gave him a meaningful stare. It was obvious where these rumors were coming from.

“Girls were talking about that in class, too,” Rio added.

That meant the rumors had spread pretty far.

Things were taking a turn for the worse again. Sakuta didn’t give a damn what anyone thought of him, but Tomoe definitely would.

“Figured you oughtta know.”

“Yeah.”

Yuuma raised a hand, said, “Gotta get to practice,” and ran off toward the gym. Rio watched him go.

Not wanting to interrupt, Sakuta turned away from the window and lit the alcohol lamp. He filled a beaker with water and waited for it to boil.

He'd better do something before rumors about Tomoe spread further.

"What are you doing, Azusagawa?"

He looked up and found Rio standing across the desk from him.

"I figured I'd drink some coffee and calm down."

"Not that. What about Sakurajima?"

"Where's the instant coffee?"

She opened a drawer and took out the jar.

"Fine," she said. "But what brings you here?"

"Well, I haven't looped any days since, so...I'm still wondering why it happened."

The water was boiling now, so he extinguished the flame. He dumped a scoop of instant coffee into the beaker, and a black cloud spread through the clear liquid.

"I assume what you said was right."

"Mm?"

"The first-year you're currently calling a girlfriend was Laplace's demon."

That was a very deliberate choice of words. Rio clearly knew they were faking it.

"And she's rolling the dice until things turn out the way she wants."

Rio pulled a die out of her pocket and rolled it across the counter. A five, then a four, then a two.

"Right now, she's happy with the way things are working out, so she doesn't need a redo."

The die's one was painted red. When that came up, Rio stopped rerolling.

"She's unaware of it."

"If she was, she'd be a *real* demon."

"True."

He took a sip of coffee. It was bitter.

“Sounds like you almost want another loop to happen,” Rio said, taking her glasses off.

“If it’s not going to happen again, I just want someone to tell me it won’t.”

She ignored him. “You sure you don’t want a do-over yourself?” she asked.

Like this was the whole reason she’d brought the subject up.

“.....”

“So you do.”

“Have you never thought, ‘If only I’d...’?”

“Is this about your sister?”

Rio wasn’t about to let him worm out of this one. Payback for teasing her about Yuuma?

“Yeah. Is that bad?”

“It’s not bad, but it is out of character.”

“I don’t seriously want to go back and try again.”

“Then what?”

“I just want to stop thinking about the shoulda woulda couldas when I know they won’t get me anywhere.”

“That does sound like you.”

“I can barely manage living in the present. Going back in time...no way I can deal with all the possibilities that brings. It’d be a nightmare.”

Rio ignored this as she set up her gas burner.

Sakuta flicked the die on the table. It came up a three.

“Uh, Futaba...”

“What?”

Busy with the flame, she sounded annoyed. Like she’d heard what she wanted to hear and had lost all interest in Sakuta.

“Any good ways to beat someone bigger than you who’s also an athlete?”

“.....”

Rio’s hands paused. There was a look of surprise in her eyes. But it quickly faded to scorn. Eventually, she snorted derisively.

“Not my field.”

“Thought not.”

She got the flame adjusted so it was burning blue.

“But...”

“Hmm?”

“Humans aren’t monkeys, so if you use your head...you might have a chance.”

That was a very Rio solution.



All my lies to you

1

Sunday evening, Sakuta got home from work to find a message on the answering machine.

“Who could that be?”

Their father didn’t live with them, so he called sometimes to check in.

Figuring it was from him, Sakuta pressed the button.

“This is Mai Sakurajima. I’m back from Kagoshima. Just letting you know.”

That was not what he’d expected. She sounded more formal than usual, which was a delight in its own right.

He played it back again.

“This is Mai Sakurajima. I’m back from Kagoshima. Just letting you know.”

The answering machine happily let him hear Mai’s voice again.

He was about to press it a third time when he realized that would be pretty obnoxious.

Instead, he picked up the phone and punched in her cell number. From memory, of course.

She answered on the third ring.

“Who is it?”

“Me.”

“I know. Your number’s in my contacts. I was about to take a bath.”

She sounded annoyed, like it was his fault for choosing that moment to call. He chalked this up to the mysteries of the female mind.

“So you’re naked?”

“If I was, I wouldn’t have picked up.”

“Why not?”

“Only a pervert would talk to a boy while naked.”

She had a point there. Sakuta would rather she *not* do anything like that.

“So, what?” He could tell she clearly wanted to hurry up and take her bath.

“Welcome back, Mai.”

“.....”

This seemed to rattle her a bit.

“Is that it?” she asked.

“That’s not the answer I was hoping for.”

“I’m not saying ‘I’m home.’”

Did saying it just now not count? Sakuta felt like it did, but maybe it didn’t for Mai.

As he was mulling that over, she said, “Bye,” and hung up.

You couldn’t tie her down.

Sure she’d never pick up if he dialed again, Sakuta put the receiver back on the hook, deciding to be satisfied with the knowledge she was safely back.

The next day was Monday, July 7. The day of the Star Festival—and a sunny day, not a cloud in the sky.

Sakuta turned the TV on while he ate breakfast.

“It seems like Orihime and Hikoboshi should be able to meet up safely!”

The male morning newscaster was always looking out for them like that.

The remainder of the weather report suggested that areas across the country were getting into the high eighties. The weather lady looked very pleased by this. Sakuta immediately lost all motivation.

If he could get away with it, he’d gladly skip school. But Sakuta had good reason not to. End-of-term exams started today.

Enduring the heat, Sakuta made it to school, where math and English exams lay in wait. He managed to answer everything on the math test, but the listening section of the English exam was a total wash. On his way home, he resolved to find a job that required absolutely no English.

Maybe he wasn't meant to be Santa Claus.

The short walk to the station was filled with Minegahara students. It was even busier than usual, since the sports teams didn't have practice during exams.

As he passed through the gates, Sakuta recognized someone up ahead.

Tomoe, wearing a backpack with the straps loose to hide her butt.

She had her head down, looking uncomfortable, and was dragging her feet. The three girls she was always with—Rena, Hinako, and Aya—were laughing about ten yards ahead.

It didn't seem like Tomoe had stayed behind for something and was just now catching up. It looked more like the other girls knew Tomoe was there but were pretending they hadn't noticed.

The gap between them looked intentional.

Sakuta immediately thought of what Yuuma had said last Friday.

"There's some ugly rumors."

Ugly was honestly a mild term for it.

"Like she's easy or a slut or sleeping with you."

This could be bad.

The tiny platform at Shichirigahama Station was packed with Minegahara students.

Tomoe was standing on the Fujisawa-bound side, at the far corner, looking very small. There was a little clearing around her, like she was surrounded by an invisible wall. They were all in the same place, but the air around Tomoe was different.

Sakuta used his pass and stepped through the gates, ignoring the stares to stand right by her side. He poked her in the cheek.

"Don't look so gloomy," he said.

"Senpai..."

Tomoe looked up for a moment but was too conscious of her surroundings to

stay that way for long.

Sakuta joining her had only increased the amount of attention. But nobody was blatantly staring. It was all quick glances, wondering if the rumors were true.

People were laughing at them, fascinated by the gossip, looking down on people who'd stepped out of line.

This was an everyday thing for Sakuta. He didn't think anything of it. But it was crushing Tomoe.

She was staring at her feet, and he could tell she was barely holding up. It was painfully clear she wanted to turn and run.

Like she was about to burst into tears.

This kind of attention was the one thing Tomoe was least equipped to handle. She'd been desperately reading the air to avoid anything like this happening. She'd even made Sakuta pretend to be her boyfriend to avoid this sort of embarrassment.

Like a whip across her back, a braying laugh came from behind them.

Tomoe quivered.

Irritation rising, Sakuta turned around to find three grinning third-year boys behind them. All three looked pretty trendy. Chains hanging off every hip. In the center of the group was Maesawa.

His eyes met Sakuta's. He smirked.

"First-years put out for anyone these days." He addressed the boys with him but spoke loud enough that everyone could hear. His eyes offered up a clear challenge to Sakuta.

A pretty lazy way to start a fight. This struck Sakuta as funny, so he laughed. Giving as good as he got was just basic manners.

"Ah?!" Maesawa snarled, his brow furrowing. Radiating fury, he took a couple steps toward Sakuta. "Did you just laugh at me?"

"I still am! What about it?"

“You think this is a joke?!”

Maesawa grabbed a handful of his shirt.

“I’m just openly mocking you.”

Someone down the platform laughed out loud.

An instantly later, a powerful punch caught Sakuta’s face. There was a dull thud. Sakuta staggered a few steps backward.

“Eek!”

That shriek was probably Tomoe.

Everything turned white. His left cheek went numb.

A few seconds later, a hot, throbbing pain surged across it. Maesawa was three inches taller than Sakuta, his physique honed from all that basketball, and his punch was even stronger than Sakuta had expected.

“Ow...”

A silence settled over the crowd of Minegahara students. Everyone held their breath. Tension filled the air.

Maesawa swung his arm back to unleash a follow-up.

“Senpai!”

Tomoe’s tiny body was suddenly standing between Sakuta and Maesawa.

“Don’t!” Sakuta yelled, grabbing her backpack and pulling her backward. The momentum of this left him standing where she’d been.

Tomoe must have caught Maesawa off guard, because he froze, fist in the air.

The crowd of rubbernecks didn’t dare blink.

Sakuta had planned to grin and bear it. But the pain in his cheek wasn’t going away, and he felt anger rising within him. The heat of it taking control.

“Senpai...,” Tomoe said, tugging his sleeve fretfully. Seeing her on the verge of tears made putting up with it seem stupid.

He took a big step forward and raised a fist.

Maesawa instantly put both arms up in a guard. That left his legs wide-open. Sakuta planted the tip of his shoe hard in Maesawa's shin.

"Unh?!" A grunt of surprise and pain.

Maesawa quickly knelt down, clutching his injured right leg.

"That wasn't fair!" he hissed, glaring balefully up at Sakuta.

"Rich, coming from you."

Sakuta planted the sole of his foot on Maesawa's face. Yakuza-style. It hit hard.

"Gah!"

Unable to catch himself, Maesawa fell on his ass and rolled across the platform.

He glared up at Sakuta, red with shame, anger, and mortification.

No one said anything. The shock of it all was so great, nobody knew how to react. They were all hanging on Sakuta's next words.

Sakuta wasn't about to play to the crowd's wishes, but he chose the thing he thought Maesawa would least want to hear.

"Pathetic."

A stir ran through the crowd. People were giggling.

"Who... Who...?!" Maesawa spluttered, too angry to complete the sentence. His lips flapped like a goldfish.

The two third-years with him stepped forward.

Sakuta ignored them. "You'd better wash your face, senpai," he said.

"Huh?"

"I stepped in some dogshit yesterday."

Maesawa quickly wiped his face with one hand. When the crowd saw him sniff that hand, another laugh went up.

The two third-years stopped advancing, keeping their distance. The shit barrier was a powerful force.

Sakuta looked around and saw a lot of students playing with their phones. Posting about it on social media, texting friends who'd missed the show.

And he saw Rena staring at him in shock. Hinako was in a panic next to her, and Aya was trying to calm her down.

"Th-this is bullshit!" Maesawa snarled, finally making it to his feet.

"That's my line. You don't wanna make a spectacle of yourself, don't start a shitshow. It's a pathetic way to live."

"Bullshit!"

"You said that already."

"....."

Apparently, his speech circuits had fried. Maesawa couldn't think of any other words. He just kept muttering "Bullshit" like a broken record.

"Senpai, that's enough," Tomoe said. Her hands were clutching the back of Sakuta's uniform. She seemed worried about the effect all this negative attention would have on Maesawa. Given how much she hated that kind of scrutiny, it made sense she wouldn't want it happening to anyone else, either.

But Sakuta wasn't done yet.

"No, I got one more thing to say." Sakuta glared down at Maesawa. "She's sleeping with me? Ha! I'm a virgin."

And with that he took Tomoe's hand and pulled her out of the station. Each step they took got faster. Before he knew it, they were running.

Not because he thought Maesawa might be chasing them.

They were just both so wound up they couldn't *not* run. Sakuta was almost giddy. He didn't know why he was enjoying this so much. But his heart was racing.

"Senpai, you went a bit *too* far."

"Did I?!"

"Way too far," Tomoe said. But she was grinning the whole time they ran.

The sounds of the surf and the wind calmed their racing hearts.

The ugly feelings that had been building up inside cleared away.

The beach was magic like that.

Sakuta and Tomoe had fled the station and were walking west along the Shichirigahama sands. They could see Enoshima floating on the waters ahead, getting slowly closer.

“Wanna join me?” Tomoe suggested. She had her socks and shoes off and was enjoying the waves lapping at her feet. Sakuta was a couple of yards inland, walking just out of range of the surf.

“And who would carry *my* shoes?” he asked.

Tomoe had dropped her shoes and socks on the beach, and Sakuta was carrying them for her.

It was a weekday, but there were still a decent number of people on the beach. Families with little kids, groups of college students, grown-up couples... all laughing and playing in the surf. It was a beautiful day, and they were enjoying their first beach visit of the year. Everyone seemed happy.

“Senpai.”

“I’m not coming in!”

“Not that.” Tomoe pouted, puffing out her cheeks.

“Then what?”

“Thank you.”

“.....”

“That made me really happy.”

“You’re welcome,” he said without emotion. His left cheek still hurt. It felt like it was on fire.

“I think I’m starting to understand what you said before.”

“Mm?”

“The thing about having the whole world against you but one person who

needs you. Something like that anyway.”

“You don’t even remember it!”

“I really felt like your girlfriend there. Like I really mattered to you.”

The wind and the waves swept her delight to Sakuta’s ears.

“Well, we agreed to that for the rest of the term.”

Originally, it had been a “more than a senpai, less than a boyfriend” thing, but that last part had pretty much gone away.

“Most people wouldn’t go that far for a fake girlfriend. It wouldn’t be that important.”

“I’m a perfectionist.”

“You’re such a jamoke,” Tomoe said, unleashing her natural accent.

“A what now?”

“You ain’t even know that?” Tomoe scoffed. Then she looked proud. “I’ll help you out. It means you ain’t funny.”

“I didn’t mean it to be.”

They walked on, side by side.

“Koga.”

“Mm?”

“I should be thanking you. If you hadn’t stepped in, he’d have kicked my ass.”

Given Maesawa’s size advantage, another two or three punches would have taken all the fight out of Sakuta.

“But be more careful. If he’d hit you, you could have been really hurt.”

“I just got kinda desperate.”

“Well, you are the schoolgirl of justice.”

He remembered how they first met, when she’d mistaken him for a creep and tried to save a little girl, kicking him in the ass without a thought for the consequences.

That was Tomoe's true nature, he thought.

When it got down to it, she'd moved before she had time to think. Driven by a need to do something.

Not a thing just anyone could do. Most people freeze up in a dangerous situation.

"Also, sorry."

"For what?" She looked puzzled.

"I was pretty brutal with your friend's crush."

"Ohhhh, right. Crap."

Tomoe stopped, a cloud passing over her face.

The waves lapped at her feet.

"No point thinking about it now," Sakuta said.

"It's your fault! Think with me!"

"I said I was sorry instead."

"So irresponsible!" Tomoe wailed.

Then, her shoulders flinched. She pulled her phone out of her pocket. It must have vibrated.

"Oh, it's from Rena..."

She stared at the screen, looking tense.

"What's she say?"

"“Sorry, I dunno what got into me.”"

"Oh?" Sakuta couldn't help but grin.

"“I've lost all respect for Maesawa.”"

"Well, that's a real shame. Then again, if her crush can be ended by a little dogshit in the face, it wasn't that strong."

She'd been all about the surface appeal. If she'd really loved him, a single undignified moment would never have been enough to change that. Even that

shame was still a part of him.

“‘We’re gonna study for exams. Wanna join us?’”

Well, at least everything was cleared up and they were friends again. Tomoe responded, and they went back and forth a few times. She was smiling again.

But even after she put the phone away, she seemed disinclined to leave the water.

“You aren’t going?”

“I said I wanna have you help me study.”

“And?”

She showed him her screen. There were posts from all three of her friends, containing no words—all just stamps with big grinning faces.

“Oh, right, senpai...”

“Mm?”

“There is one thing I want to say.”

She was fidgeting.

“You need to pee?”

“No!”

“Then what?”

“I—I...haven’t, either.”

“Haven’t what?”

He knew what she meant, but her evident embarrassment was so entertaining, Sakuta pretended not to. How would she explain herself?

He waited expectantly.

“I’m a virgin,” she said, looking up at him.

He couldn’t stop himself. He laughed out loud.

“Wh-why are you laughing?! That’s mean!”

She kicked water at him. Sakuta dodged.

“Don’t dodge!”

“Did you think I believed those rumors?”

“No, but if you did? I really didn’t want that.”

“Still, going straight to ‘I’m a virgin,’ just laying it out there?”

An elderly couple with a dog were passing right next to them.

“K-keep your voice down!”

“You said it first.”

“W-well...it thought it was best to be clear.”

“And it certainly is now! I’m not fussed about that stuff, either way.”

Sakuta started walking. Didn’t seem like they’d ever move on, otherwise.

“Ah! Wait!”

She came splashing after him.

Tomoe in the surf, and Sakuta on the beach, the distance between them never closing but never widening.

“But you said you’d had a boyfriend before?” he reminded her with a smirk.

“You know perfectly well that’s a lie,” she said, half-sheepish, half-annoyed.

“It didn’t seem all that unlikely.”

“I mean, everyone says they had a boyfriend in junior high. Rena, Hinako, Aya. Hinako’s still dating that same guy.”

“Hmm.”

“I didn’t volunteer the information! It was more like everyone just agreed I definitely had one. And it felt wrong to disagree, and...now here we are.”

“Ahhh.”

“And if I said I’d never dated anyone, I thought you’d look down on me.”

“Who is it you’re fighting?”

“I dunno.”

Probably the views of the world or the expectations people had for her. She was putting all kinds of work into protecting other people's conceptions of "Tomoe Koga."

A daily battle to make a version of her that nobody would dislike. A battle against something unseen...like the air.

"Uh, senpai...", she said, giving him a sidelong glance even as she kicked the water.

"Mm?"

Sakuta was picking his way across the beach, trying not to trip on the sand.

"How can I ever repay you for this?"

The sound of her footsteps stopped.

He took a few more steps, then stopped and turned toward her.

She looked very serious. Waiting for his answer.

"I can't believe you're asking that with a straight face."

"It's a serious question."

"I don't need you repaying me. The Japan team made it out of the group stage just fine."

The other day, they'd scored a huge win against a strong opponent, making it to the knockout stage. Four years of hard work had paid off, and their offense had exploded.

Tomoe had kept her promise and cheered them on the whole time. She'd shown him a picture of herself in the Japan team uniform, with the Japanese flag painted on her face.

"But..."

"If that's not enough, come out with me this weekend."

"Where?"

"I wanna buy my sister some clothes once my paycheck arrives, but I really don't know what looks are 'in.'"

“Okay...”

She'd agreed to it but didn't seem satisfied. Like that wasn't enough to pay him back.

“Fine, one more thing, then.”

“What?” she asked, a bit too eager.

“When the lie ends, we stay friends.”

“.....”

She hadn't been expecting that, and her eyes went wide. Then, she giggled, yet she didn't seem satisfied.

“You don't wanna?”

“I do, and I don't.”

“Come again?”

Like something was bothering her, Tomoe put her hand to her heart, opening and closing it nervously.

“You don't have to,” he said.

“No, you win. I'll be your best friend.”

Tomoe's smile gleamed beneath the summer sun.

“Just normal friends is fine.”

“Aww.”

Sakuta and Tomoe walked two stations' worth of beach before finally boarding a train at Koshigoe Station.

They looked around the train before they sat down. Over an hour had passed since Sakuta's fight with Maesawa, and there were hardly any Minegahara uniforms on board. Everyone had gone home early to prepare for tomorrow's exams.

Tomoe looked very relieved.

They found empty seats and sat together. There was a group of college kids directly opposite, cheering as the train threaded its way between rows of

homes.

“This is amazing!”

“They’re so close! We’re gonna hit!”

“Man, this is revolutionary.”

Doesn’t that word literally mean the opposite of what you’re trying to say?
Just as he had that thought, his eyes met Tomoe’s. She must have been thinking the same thing, because she was grinning. This train ride was more nostalgic than new. The guy needed to work on his vocabulary.

“So where we gonna study, Koga?”

“Huh? We’re actually going to?”

“If we don’t, you’ll have lied to your friends.”

“...Are you any good at chemistry?”

She gave him a searching look.

“I feel confident I’m better than you.”

“That sounds insulting.”

“How so?”

“We’ll have to find out if it’s true.”

“Then you wanna come over?”

“Huh?”

“No parents around.”

“Uhhhh?!”

“Shhh, not so loud—we’re on the train.”

A bunch of eyes had turned toward them.

“B-but...I...I wasn’t ready for...still, uh...okay.”

A rapid flurry of expressions passed over Tomoe’s face, from panic to fluster to embarrassment, but in the end, she nodded.

“You’ve definitely got the wrong idea here.”

“I—I don’t! Don’t treat me like a child.”

“Well, you don’t want to take that first step toward being a grown-up.”

Sakuta spent the remaining minutes before they reached Fujisawa Station giving ten different reasons why he would never try anything with Tomoe. Tomoe sulked the whole time and deliberately stepped on his foot on the way off the train.

It was a ten-minute walk from the station to Sakuta’s apartment. There, they took the elevator to the fifth floor.

“I’m home!” he announced, opening the door.

Kaede poked her head out of the living room.

“Welcome ba—”

She made it halfway through, realized Sakuta wasn’t alone, and hid behind the doorframe. She peered at Tomoe like a small animal that has spotted its natural predator.

“You’ve brought *another* girl over?!” she asked.

This seemed like a smirch on his honor, so he ignored it.

“Come on in.”

“Th-thanks for having me,” Tomoe said. She bobbed her head and took off her shoes. She lined them up perfectly, and then Sakuta beckoned her into his room.

Before he could follow her, Kaede tugged at his sleeve.

“What?”

She stretched to whisper in his ear.

“If you’re going to escort a lady of the night to our domicile, you should warn me in advance.”

“Kaede, you’ve definitely got the wrong idea.”

Tomoe was hardly sexy enough to warrant such a description. Her hairstyle was too simple, her makeup light, and why in the world did she say *domicile*?

No one had ever referred to their apartment in such lofty terms before.

“How much has she siphoned off you?”

“She’s Tomoe Koga, a kohai from school.”

“If you’re after younger women, you have me!”

“What are we talking about?”

“I’ll tell Mai!”

That was concerning. She had approved of the matter with Tomoe, but a play-by-play report would definitely hurt Her Majesty’s feelings.

“We’re gonna study for exams. We can talk later.”

He peeled Kaede off him and shut the door.

“Sit anywhere,” he said, waving at a cushion.

Tomoe sat down on her knees, formal Japanese–style. He set up a folding table in front of her.

“Your legs’ll go numb like that.”

“R-right.”

Minding the hem of her skirt, Tomoe shifted her legs to either side.

Sakuta sat across from her.

He opened a Modern Japanese textbook to prepare for the next day. Tomoe had her chemistry textbook and notes but didn’t seem to be focused on them. Her eyes were darting this way and that around his room. She turned red when she saw his bed. She then looked at his desk and hung her head.

Finally, she blurted, “I can’t!” and shoved her books back in her backpack. She tried to put it on but couldn’t get her arms through the straps.

“I-I’m gonna go study with Rena and the girls after all!” she said and dashed out of the room. “Th-thanks for having me!”

She was already out the door.

“Yo, Koga!” Sakuta shouted, chasing after her. He got one sandal on and took a half step outside.

She was already by the elevator. The bell rang as it reached their floor.

A moment later, the doors opened.

Tomoe tried to step in but stopped, gaping.

Someone was coming out.

“Ah!”

Sakuta gaped, too. A Minegahara uniform. Black tights despite the summer dress code. Mai.

Tomoe took Mai’s place on the elevator.

Mai glanced once at Sakuta and once back at Tomoe as the doors closed.

Then she walked toward Sakuta, her heels clicking.

“You two got awful friendly while I wasn’t looking.”

Her slim, pale finger poked him in the nose.

“She was bright red! What did you do to her?”

There was an accusation in her eyes.

“I tried to study with her.”

“Study what?”

“I went with Modern Japanese, and Koga with chemistry.”

“Hmph.”

Seemingly even more disgruntled, Mai increased the pressure behind her finger.

It seemed best to change the subject.

“Mai...did you bring us souvenirs?”

His eyes lit on the paper bag in her hands. Mai’s mood did not visibly improve, but she removed her finger.

“Yes,” she said as she shoved the bag into his hands.

He looked inside and saw impressive blocks of dried fish, some fish cakes, and a custard-filled sponge cake called *kasutadon*.

“These are all good cold, too.”

“Thank you.”

With that business taken care of, Mai turned around and headed back to the elevators.

“You aren’t coming in?”

“If I came in now, it would be like I’m in competition with that first-year.”

That kinda made sense and kinda didn’t, but she left anyway.

No point in just standing there. Sakuta went back inside and called Kaede out, and they ate the souvenirs together.

“These *are* good!”

“Yes, they are!”

2

The second day of final exams, Tuesday. Sakuta was called to the faculty office as soon as he arrived, taken to the guidance counselor’s office, and forced to take his exams alone.

He didn’t need to ask why. The cause was clearly the fight at Shichirigahama Station.

The station attendant must have phoned it in.

“During midterms, you make a huge fuss in the schoolyard, and now, during finals, you get in a fight. Do you have something against exams, Azusagawa?”

“I think we’d all be better off without them.”

“That’ll never happen.”

His homeroom teacher went through the motions of chewing him out but didn’t sound that upset. There were a lot of eyewitnesses, and it seemed like the extenuating circumstances had been reported accurately.

Especially the part where Maesawa had swung first.

The teacher concluded by warning him to be careful, but Sakuta wasn’t sure

what he was supposed to be careful of. Dogshit on the road, perhaps.

Apparently, Maesawa hadn't come to school at all.

After school, Sakuta left the guidance counselor's office and found Tomoe waiting for him in the hall.

She looked apologetic, like it was her fault Sakuta was in trouble.

"How'd your exams go?" he asked.

"Awful." Even her answer seemed downcast.

"Studying with your friends just turn into a family restaurant hangout?" he speculated.

He started walking, and she hastily followed.

"How'd your exams go?" she asked.

"Consistent."

"Consistently good?"

"Consistently bad."

"Well, at least we're in this together."

Camaraderie in bad exam results wasn't going to make either of them better students, but Tomoe seemed relieved by it anyway.

"Oh, right, senpai, you've got to get a phone."

"Huh?"

"I mean, I left suddenly yesterday, right? Then, um...I got worried what you thought about it."

"I thought you were emotionally unstable."

Tomoe's face instantly turned red. Anger boiling over.

"Well, I want to follow up on that kind of thing faster!" she snapped, glaring at him. "And you got called to the faulty office, so I wanted to get in touch with you earlier...and I couldn't focus on my tests at all."

She seemed to be carrying a grudge here.

“But, uh...that’s all you thought?” she asked, seemingly reluctant.

“All about what?”

“You didn’t have any other thoughts on yesterday?”

“I didn’t really think about you at all.”

“That’s a horrible way to put it. But...okay.”

Tomoe whispered “Good” under her breath, looking relieved. Sakuta noticed her eyes seemed a little puffy.

“Were you up all night studying?”

If so, not being able to focus on the exams was a real tragedy.

“No, but why?”

“Your eyes are a bit panda.”

“You’re kidding?!” Tomoe yanked out a mirror and checked. “Argh, they are! I’ll fix that.”

She dashed off to the girls’ restroom. Always in a hurry.

Left on his own, Sakuta muttered to himself, “That looked more like she was crying her eyes out.”

On Wednesday, the midpoint of finals, Sakuta was able to take his exams in class.

He’d spotted Maesawa on the train on the way in. Seemed like he’d recovered from the shock. Their eyes met once, and the look of disgust on Maesawa’s face suggested he had not seen the error of his ways.

With both of them on board, the air on the train turned ugly fast, and people were whispering “Dogshit” all around. Some pointing at Sakuta, some at Maesawa. One or two people also said, “Virgin proclamation.” This was definitely intended to make fun of Sakuta, but he wasn’t at all upset by it.

That seemed to be the extent of it.

Considering the scale of the conflict, this response seemed kinda understated, but it *was* during exams, which helped divert attention. Everyone was too busy

focusing on themselves to care about anything else.

But the one thing that was very clear was that everyone knew about Sakuta and Tomoe's relationship now. Everyone knew the reason Sakuta fought Maesawa had been to protect Tomoe, which *must* have meant they were in love. There was no way they were dialing things back to "more than a senpai, less than a boyfriend" now.

Which also meant their idea of naturally drifting apart over summer vacation might not be convincing. They might need a clear, definitive reason for breaking up.

When he finished his exams, Sakuta stared out the window at the ocean, trying to think of one.

The skies grew uneasy Thursday morning, and the rain came in fits and spurts. Very unpleasant.

Afternoon rolled around, and there was no sign of it clearing up. The laundry he had hung out to dry in his room was not doing well.

"Quit looking around."

Seated in Sakuta's room beneath his laundry was, for some reason, Mai.

He'd enjoyed a leisurely lunch with Kaede and had just finished hanging up the laundry when she arrived.

"We're studying for exams," she'd informed him with an intimidating growl. Which brings us to the present.

They had the folding table set up in the middle of the room and were seated on adjacent sides of it. From that forty-five-degree angle, Mai did not appear to be in a good mood.

"Are you mad at me, Mai?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Because you're suddenly making me study."

"Exams end tomorrow. I'm here to help you learn. Solve this problem."

She pointed at a physics problem.

It involved the Doppler effect.

“You’ve got five minutes.”

A very Spartan approach.

“As long as I don’t fail...”

“Sakuta, are you thinking about your future at all?”

“My future is at your side.”

“.....”

Mai silently clicked her mechanical pencil. She didn’t have a notebook ready, so this must have been for something besides writing. Like stabbing him.

It seemed safer to avoid more jokes.

“I do want to go to college.”

There were two conditions in his way. The first was a simple matter of academic performance. He couldn’t get into college if he couldn’t pass the entrance exams. The other condition was economic, given his family’s circumstances. His father had already dropped hints that private colleges would probably not be an option.

“You, Mai?”

“Same.”

“Not focusing on work?”

“I can do both. Always have.”

She was now.

“I’m looking at a public college in Yokohama.”

Whether run by the nation or the city, the bar for entry would be pretty high.

“You *are* a good student.”

She’d said she’d never scored below an eight.

“.....”

Chin in hand, Mai gave him a long, searching look.

This felt deliberate, so he avoided her eyes.

“Don’t look away,” she scolded. “You want to go to the same school as me, right?”

That’s what he’d expected.

“Well, I don’t—”

“You want to.”

Smiling, she pointed the tip of her pencil at him.

“If I can.”

“Then *study*.”

“.....”

“If it’s public, the burden on your parents’ resources won’t be too bad, and if it’s in Yokohama, you can commute from here.”

Mai was right. She’d already filled in all the moats. What happened to the winter campaign to take Osaka Castle? She’d skipped right ahead to the summer one.

“Yeah, well...”

“What’s your problem?”

“I’m just imagining how difficult it’ll be to achieve the required level of academic performance.”

Sakuta’s grades were thoroughly average. Rock solid on them sixes.

“But that is easily solved by you applying yourself.”

“And I don’t want to do that, which is why I’m resisting.”

“Even after what I said?”

“Honestly, I still haven’t heard a word about what you really want.”

Mai sat up at this, staring right into his eyes.

“If I said I want to go to the same school as you, would you be motivated?”

“.....”

Mai's cheeks were slightly flushed. She might be acting, but those words were still like an arrow through his heart.

"Wh-what?" she asked.

"I want to jump you right now."

"I *will* stab you."

He threw his hands up, surrendering. And then rolled over on the floor.

"No slacking!"

"I just can't get motivated."

"What if I teach you in that bunny-girl outfit?"

"That would be *very* motivating."

What exactly did she want to teach him? His heart was racing in anticipation. But he also assumed this was just a joke.

"If you agree to study, I'll put it on."

"Really?"

Sakuta leaped to his feet.

Mai had already opened his closet. She pulled out the paper bag containing the bunny-girl outfit.

"I need to change. Get out."

She really meant it.

He hadn't dared dream of this moment. He was hardly going to blow this chance.

Without a word of protest, he left the room.

"Peep, and you die," she growled.

And shut the door behind him.

Sakuta did as he was told, waiting patiently in the hall.

Mai was changing in Sakuta's bedroom, just a thin door between them. Part of him wanted to fling it open, but he restrained himself.

There was no need for such risky actions. If he just waited, he would get to savor her bunny-girl outfit again. A moment of nudity versus a lengthy bunny-girl session... Sakuta chose the latter. He believed this was the right choice.

Kaede gave him a strange look while he waited, but he covered, saying he was feeding Nasuno.

It was a good fifteen-minute wait.

“Okay,” Mai called at last.

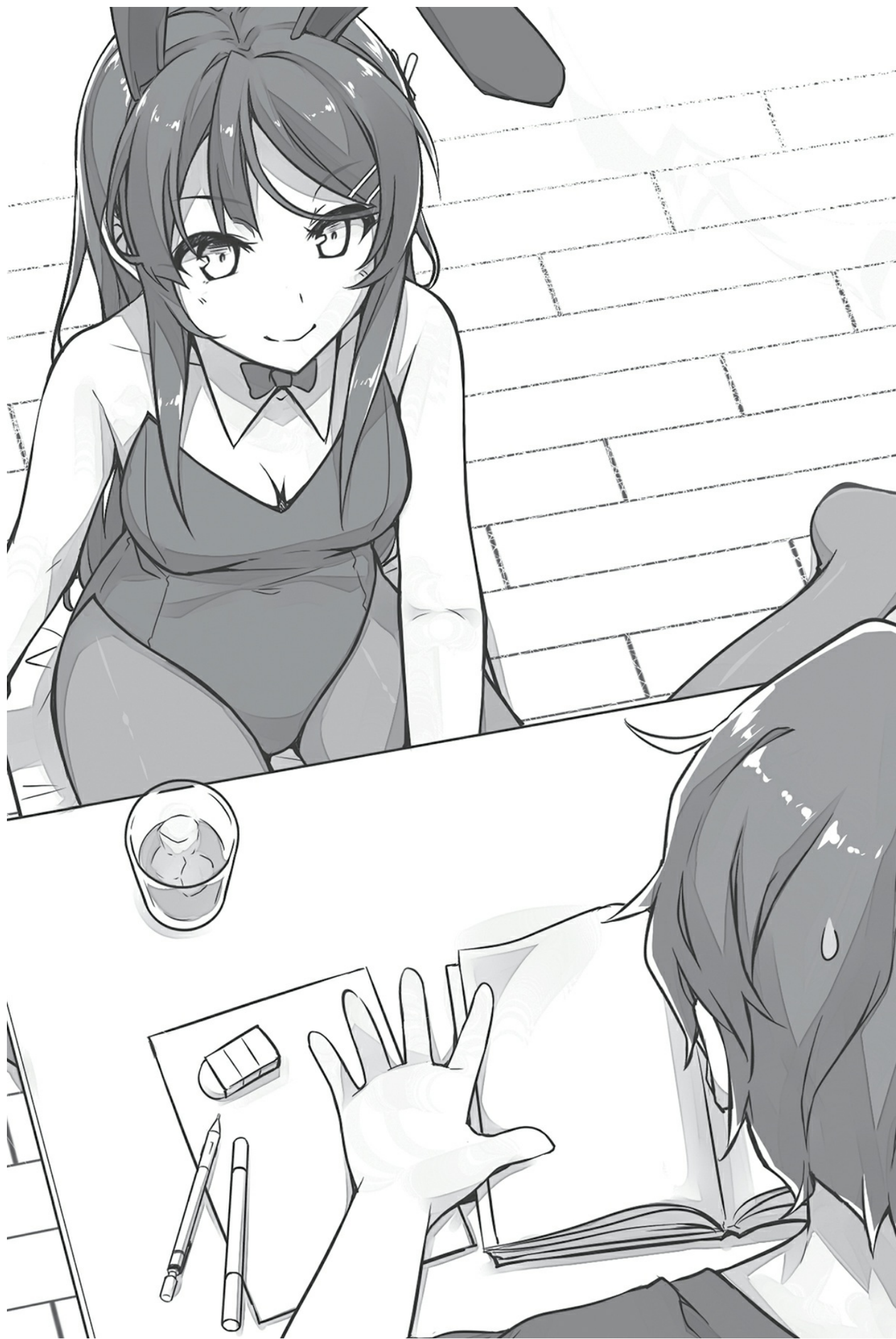
“Coming in,” he said, making sure.

“Go ahead.”

Once he heard that, he opened the door.

Mai was sitting in the same spot by the table, legs to one side.

But she was wearing a skin-tight black leotard. Black stockings on her long, slim legs. A bow tie on her throat. White cuffs on her wrists. A headband with bunny ears. The high heels alone were resting to one side, since she was indoors.



Mai's outfit had changed, but everything else was the same.

"Go on, sit down."

When Mai spoke, the ears wobbled.

Sakuta settled down across the table from her. Their knees bumped beneath it. Mai didn't pull away. Apparently, this was an acceptable level of physical contact.

"Now study."

As promised, Sakuta opened his notebook and read the problem in the textbook.

But before he knew it, his eyes were back on Mai. Her bare shoulders looked like they'd be smooth to the touch. The pale skin of her cleavage, swelling softly, forming a valley between. The tight indentation at her waist, the aesthetically pleasing curve of her hips and thighs. He could stare at her all day.

"Your hands aren't moving."

Mai reached out and poked him in the nose.

"Look at your textbook, not me."

He thought she'd be mad, but that didn't appear to be the case. She seemed to enjoy being the focus of his rapt attention.

"What's this, Mai?"

"What's what?"

"You don't seem mad."

"Should I be?"

"Something good happen?"

"No...I just figured I should try the carrot sometimes."

Mai turned away and said something else. He couldn't hear her.

"What?"

"I said, I didn't think you'd get in a fight for her."

“You saw what happened Monday?”

“Part of it. You did wash your shoe, right?”

“I made the dogshit thing up.”

“Oh. Argh, I don’t like it.”

This was hardly fair. It was a lot of work to stay on Her Majesty’s good side sometimes. He didn’t think this quite qualified as jealousy, but she was definitely displeased.

Mai let herself fall facedown on the table, glaring up at Sakuta. This really emphasized her cleavage.

“Stop staring at my boobs!”

“So basically, you’re just starved for attention.”

“Do you want to get punched?”

“Not the face!” He raised his hands, joke-guarding. She did a slow-mo punch and twisted her fist on his shoulder.

Then she sighed dramatically.

“Come on! Try to make me feel better!”

A tall order. Yet it just sounded right coming from her.

“Mai, do you have plans over summer vacation?”

“I’ll be working for half of it. You?”

“Mostly working, too. But the rest of my time, I’d love to spend with you. It is summer.”

“I can’t do pools and beaches.”

“Aww.”

“I mean it. I’m a celebrity.”

And not just any celebrity. She was a nationally famous actress. If she showed up in a swimsuit at a local beach or pool, she’d cause a small riot.

“Take your cute girlfriend to those,” Mai said, like it didn’t matter to her.

“Mai.”

“What?”

“I love *you*.”

Her hand reached out and twisted his cheek.

“Owww.”

“Don’t cheat! You’re that first-year’s boyfriend right now.”

“Well, I saw this incredibly beautiful girl and couldn’t fight the impulse.”

“Don’t tell people you love them on impulse.”

It sounded like she was scolding him, but she was smiling. Her mood seemed to have improved. Or maybe she was just enjoying messing with him.

“Come on, study.”

“Aww.”

“You can’t sleep till you solve all these problems.”

There were a lot of physics equations on the page she pointed to. The price of the bunny-girl outfit was very high. But a promise was a promise...

3

After school on Friday, with the five days of finals complete, Tomoe kept her word and went shopping with Sakuta.

They took the JR Tokaido Line from Fujisawa Station.

About a twenty-minute ride.

Tomoe took a fashion magazine out of her backpack and pored over it, looking very serious. She was still going when they reached Yokohama Station.

This stop was huge and seemingly always under construction. They changed there for the Negishi Line.

One station down that line was Sakuragicho.

The Landmark Tower, which had recently become the second tallest building

in Japan. An unmissably huge Ferris wheel. A very different type of harbor from Shichirigahama.

The sights here were the essence of what most people thought of as “Yokohama.” Yet you wouldn’t see anything like this if you stepped outside Yokohama Station.

“Senpai, you’re from Yokohama, right? Or was that just a rumor, too?”

“I’m from farther inland, out of sight of the sea, but Yokohama sprawls like that.”

Was she even listening? Tomoe had her phone out and was taking a picture of the far-off Ferris wheel. It might be a lie, but for this term only, they were a couple. She spared no effort to record these memories.

The first place Sakuta and Tomoe hit up was a large shopping mall a seven-or eight-minute walk from the station. A new place that had just opened a year before, it was all still very shiny.

It took them about half an hour to complete the necessary shopping. Sakuta’s designated budget had been approximately seven to eight thousand yen, so Tomoe helped him find a top and bottom that would be right for Kaede. The outfit was definitely the fashion of the day. And surprisingly affordable.

Since he had a little budget left over, he could aim for age appropriate underneath, too.

“Uh, Koga...”

“What?”

“What kind of underwear do you wear?”

“.....”

“.....”

“Huh?” She turned around and gaped at him.

“Are you not wearing any?”

“I am! Just normal... Why am I talking about this?! Why would you ask that?!”

“I just figured we should also get some underwear that a fifteen-year-old girl

finds appropriate.”

“Your sister should buy that on her own!”

“Uh, so I didn’t mention this when you were over, but Kaede’s quite a homebody.”

“A homebody?” Tomoe blinked at him.

“A shut-in, basically. She was bullied in junior high.”

“Huh? What about your mom?”

“The mess with my sister was too much for her. We don’t live together. My father’s taking care of her.”

“.....”

Tomoe studied his face closely.

“It finally makes sense.”

“What does?”

“That’s why you’re helping me.”

“You really are good at reading the air.”

There was no point in denying it now.

“You are, too. I thought at first you couldn’t, and that’s why you didn’t fit in, but you can figure it out just fine. You just choose to ignore it.”

“Do I?”

“You do.” Tomoe grinned and turned left. “You wait here.”

“Why?”

“J-just wait! Don’t you dare move!”

Tomoe took an escalator to the floor above.

He waited about fifteen minutes. When Tomoe came back, she was holding a blue plastic bag, too opaque to see what was inside.

“Here.”

She handed it to him, but when he started to loosen the drawstrings, she

stopped him.

“No peeking!”

“Why not?”

“B-because they’re the same ones I have on.”

She smoothed down her skirt, fidgeting. Sakuta looked at her, then at the bag in his hand.

“Now I really want to look,” he said, tugging at the drawstrings again.

“No! Don’t! Argh, senpai! If you keep being such a perv, Sakurajima will dump you.”

“Huh?”

Why bring Mai into this?

“Somehow you’ve got a nationally famous actress interested in you. Don’t blow it!”

“Weren’t you insisting it was all in my head the other day?”

She hadn’t believed him. Tomoe had demanded to know if Mai had expressly said she loved him. This was while she was sick in the nurse’s office.

“But then I saw her show up at your apartment.”

“Oh yeah, she brought us some souvenirs.”

Tomoe had given up on studying and bumped into Mai on the elevator on her way out.

“I’ll help you with her, senpai! Make sure you two get together.”

“Whose fault is it we’re not together now?”

“Urp...th-that’s why I want to help!”

“Sure, thanks. I appreciate the thought... So what next? Anything you want to buy yourself?”

“Er...uh, mm. Mind if I check one thing?”

He followed Tomoe up a floor, and a world of color opened up before him.

The swimsuit section. Swimsuits of all shapes and colors.

“I promised to go to the beach with the girls,” she said. “But my only swimsuit is the one the school makes us get... What will everyone wear?”

“Don’t you have one from junior high?”

“Why would I go back to that? Oh, how about this one?”

Looking slightly embarrassed, Tomoe picked up a frilly pink bikini.

She held it up against herself.

“Never been into padding.”

“It’s not for you!”

“Suits like that...”

Sakuta turned his attention to the curvy mannequin nearby for comparison. But his eyes lit on a blond beauty who put the mannequin to shame. A foreign bombshell so stunning his jaw dropped and he couldn’t help but stare. Curves for days.

Gorgeous blue eyes. Sexy lips. Her clothes utterly failed to hide the size of her chest or how tight her waist was. She was in a corner of the swimsuit section, speaking fluent Japanese, saying “How’s this? Or this?” to a slender girl with long black hair.

No, wait, the girl with long black hair wasn’t a girl, but a willowy man with a very androgynous face. More “beautiful boy” than “handsome.” He seemed about the same age as the blond.

This international couple was drawing attention from all over the store, not just Sakuta and Tomoe.

“What about this?”

“They’re all great,” her boyfriend said, clearly sick of it.

“No need to get all embarrassed! Nobody’s watching.”

Yeah, no, everyone was. And the boyfriend wasn’t embarrassed, he was just fed up. Was this relationship healthy?

“They’re all the same!”

“You mean you think I can make anything look good?” she asked, grinning mischievously.

That really reminded him of Mai. The particular confidence of a woman who knew exactly how beautiful she was. She was joking, but she also meant every word.

“Yeah,” he admitted. This seemed to catch her off guard. But then she smiled happily. The kind of brilliant smile that made the air around her brighten.

“Not often I get a compliment from you.”

“It’s merely a statement of fact,” he said, and then he started walking away like he just couldn’t take any more.

“Ah! Wait!” She went dashing after him, taking his arm despite his protests.

“I thought you went back to England? Why are you in Japan again?”

“I told you I have an exhibit here. And my parents are with me. You should come meet them tonight!”

“Wh-what?! That’s news to me!”

“I’m telling you now.”

Things seemed to be heating up, but since they were on the escalator now, Sakuta had no way of knowing the rest.

“Uh, so you see, Koga?” he said, turning back. “Once you fill out like that blond girl, you’ll be ready for a bikini.”

“I’ll never look like *her*!”

“I’d go with something like this instead.” He picked up a nearby suit.

It was a camisole type, covering everything up top from the chest to the waistline. The bottom was cut like a pair of shorts. On closer inspection, both top and bottom had two layers.

Tomoe stared at it for a long time, then put the suit back on the rack.

“I’ll think about it and buy something later,” she said.

When they finished shopping, Sakuta and Tomoe took a walk over to Yamashita Park. This was a pretty big park on the edge of the water. Tomoe took a ton of pictures, and occasionally they posed together, like a couple.

As the sun started setting, Tomoe pointed at the huge Ferris wheel. “Let’s finish with that,” she suggested.

The lights were making the city glow.

Their gondola slowly rose higher. They had a view of the entire harbor, drenched in the light of the sunset. Again, the phone came out, recording their date.

When she finished, Sakuta decided it was time to address the elephant in the room.

“So, Koga...”

“What?”

She was plastered to the glass, enraptured by the view.

“We need to figure out how we’re gonna break up.”

“Huh? Oh yeah...I know.”

She turned around, nodding. This suggested she was way ahead of him.

Knowledge of their relationship had spread through all corners of Minegahara. He’d even fought an upperclassman for her, so everyone thought they were pretty serious.

If their relationship just fizzled out over summer vacation, nobody would believe it. They needed to come up with a specific reason why things ended.

“Don’t worry—I’ve got a plan to dump you,” Tomoe said, like she’d thought of a fun new game.

“Wait, I’m the one getting dumped?”

“Yes, I realized you still weren’t over Sakurajima, and I broke up with you because of that.”

“That’s awfully close to home.”

“It ends with me slapping you and shouting, ‘I don’t need you!’”

“We have to act the whole thing out?”

“Reality is critical.”

“Hoo boy...”

“Make some time after the end-of-term ceremony. We’ll have our fight on the way home from a beach date.”

Tomoe smiled the whole time she explained the slap-Sakuta strategy.

While on a giant Ferris wheel filled with couples.

But things between them had never felt syrupy, the way it did with real couples. They’d never had to force the fake couple act, either.

If he had to put their relationship into words, they’d be a senpai and a kohai who got along. Somewhere along the line, they’d forged the kind of friendship where it was totally natural to tease each other.

He felt like the promise they’d made had already come true.

“When the lie ends, we stay friends.”

The way they acted together was definitely already there.

“Why are you grinning?”

“No reason.”

“Ugh, don’t play me like that!”

And Sakuta felt really comfortable with her.

4

With the final exams over, the mood in the school was like summer vacation had already arrived. Rejoicing or despairing over the exam scores aside, everyone was poised for escape, taking comfort in the knowledge they just had to survive this week.

With the local beaches officially open, it was impossible to sit in class diligently reviewing the exam answers.

The one saving grace was that the waves on Shichirigahama were pretty rough, and swimming wasn't currently allowed. On days when the crowds were right outside the windows, students were poised to riot. But you only had to look left to see the Yuigahama beach and right to see Enoshima Eastside Beach.

The sight of far-off crowds and roofs of beach stalls made studying feel like a complete waste.

The teachers knew it as well and were just going through the motions.

Nobody cared.

Loads of students went off to swim the moment school let out. You could tell who, because they were all red with sunburn.

A typical summer sight at any seaside school.

The week passed peacefully.

The fake relationship with Tomoe went well. No one suspected a thing. Tomoe was getting along with her friends as well. She'd gone shopping with Rena, Hinako, and Aya on Sunday and bought a swimsuit. She told Sakuta about it at work.

"You want to see it, senpai?"

"Not really. More important, Koga..."

"How could anything be?!"

"My sister really liked the clothes you picked for her. Thanks."

"Oh, sure. Good!"

"But I can't believe you wear *those* panties."

"Huh?! You saw them?!"

"I never would have suspected *that* was lurking beneath your skirt."

"Th-they're totally normal!"

Enjoying their time together, the final week of the term came to an end. And the last day, Friday, July 18, came all too soon and all too readily.

On the day of the end-of-term ceremony, Sakuta was woken by Kaede

shaking him, as always.

“Morning, Kaede.”

“Good morning!”

They went to the living room, and he got breakfast ready. He flipped on the TV while he waited for the toast to finish, and it was showing highlights of the Fresh All-Star game from the night before. Crowds in a Nagasaki stadium cheering on two teams made of the best young players from each baseball league.

He and Kaede ate breakfast, absently watching it. At their feet, Nasuno munched happily away on a bowl of cat food.

“Summer vacation starts tomorrow, right?”

“And what does summer bring?”

“Watermelon!”

“I’ll bring one home.”

“It better be round!”

Eating an entire watermelon was a daunting task. They might have to foist some off on Mai, Sakuta thought. He got ready and left for school.

“Have fun!”

Kaede saw him off again.

On the train to school, he ran into Yuuma. They stood side by side, hanging on to straps above.

“You got summer plans, Sakuta?”

“Work.”

“Koga’s there, too!” Yuuma said, teasing him.

Sakuta ignored this. Yuuma had been baffled by their relationship at first but, after observing them together, seemed to have come around.

“You, Kunimi?”

“Work, practice, dates.”

“The essence of youth.”

“You’re one to talk!” Yuuma laughed, bumping his shoulder.

They chatted about this and that the rest of the way to school.

After morning homeroom, all students gathered in the gym for the ceremony. The principal’s well-intentioned speech fell on deaf ears—it was too hot to listen. Some students had brought in fans and were flapping them the whole time. Nobody yelled at them because the teachers were just as hot.

Back in his classroom, Sakuta sat through the final homeroom of the first term. The teacher read out each name in turn and handed over their report card.

Azusagawa was the first called, so he had no time to be nervous. The school used a ten-point rating system that soon brought reality crashing down on him.

His grades were basically the same as they always were. Thanks to Mai’s bunny-girl coaching, his physics grade was an eight, but everything else kept him at a thoroughly average six.

In the comment field, his teacher included a roundabout warning related to the incident with Maesawa. There was nothing else of interest.

The teacher wrapped up homeroom with a warning. “I know it’s summer, but don’t get carried away and hurt yourselves.” Teachers had been ending homerooms that way since elementary school.

The student on duty yelled, “Rise! Bow!” and a cheer went up. It was over. Finally. Emotions ran high.

Putting the commotion behind him, Sakuta left quickly.

The hall was filled with lingering students. It was a long vacation, and given they all had one another’s numbers, why not just go home? Was there some reason nobody did?

Since most students were taking their time, the road to the station was unusually empty. So was Shichirigahama Station itself. When Sakuta got there, there were maybe ten people around.

He walked down to where the first car on a Fujisawa-bound train stopped and

waited for the train. Six more minutes.

Before it pulled in, Tomoe came running up.

“You beat me here!” she said.

They’d agreed to go to the beach today.

Their final date.

They’d decided to meet at the station.

Tomoe was fussing with the top of her skirt, like it wasn’t sitting right. She noticed his look.

“I changed into my swimsuit in the school changing room,” she offered before he could ask.

A classic seaside school trick. Students on different sports teams left the beaches, went back to school, and used the team showers. Yuuma had mentioned this last year.

“You’re leering, senpai.”

“I know.”

He could see pink through her uniform blouse.

“That was a hint that you should stop,” Tomoe chided, holding her marine tote bag up protectively.

While they were talking, the train rolled slowly into the station.

Sakuta and Tomoe left the train at the Enoden Enoshima Station and, in less than ten minutes, were on the Eastside beach. A long, gentle curve of sand that could get really crowded this time of year.

It was a weekday, though, so it was only locals and still pretty empty.

They split up by the stalls, and Sakuta changed into his trunks. He also put on a T-shirt. People tended to get the wrong idea if they saw the scars on his chest.

He dropped his things in a locker just as Tomoe emerged. Changing into her suit at school had certainly sped things up.

“Right, let’s swim!”

“Huh? No opinions?”

“I thought you didn’t want me looking.”

Sakuta recognized the suit she was wearing. It was the same one he’d held up when they were shopping together. She’d elected not to buy it then but had gone back with her friends and chosen that one anyway.

“I think it’s cute,” he said.

“D-don’t say *cute*!”

“Then what do you want me to say?”

“.....”

Tomoe thought about it.

“...*Cute*, I guess?”

“You’re emotionally unstable again, Koga.”

“You know how girls’ minds work!”

“Not a whit.”

“Ah, shucks! You’re at it again!”

“Well, if we’re gonna shuck things, let’s get some corn on the cob.”

He turned around and headed for the stall.

“Oh! Me, too.”

Tomoe hurried back to his side.

Corn on the cob with the summer sun beating down on them was a treat like no other.

Midway through, there was a sudden shower, but everyone was at the beach to get wet anyway.

For lunch, they grabbed some *yakisoba* from the beach stall. While they waited for it to digest, he pulled Tomoe into the water, and once thoroughly drenched, they started swimming again. When they were tired, they made castles in the sand.

“Which castle will survive the waves the longest?”

“The loser buys shaved ice!”

“No complaints later.”

“Same to you, senpai.”

Sakuta lost.

The deciding factor was the depression in the sand between the water and the castle. Tomoe had been sitting there while she worked and left a sizable butt-print, which had proved an effective moat.



“You’ve been saved by your butt, Koga.”

“Sh-shut up! You’re still buying!”

Tomoe had her hands on her rear again and was turning red.

A loss was a loss, so he paid for the shaved ice. Tomoe went with strawberry syrup, and Sakuta went with melon.

When the sun started setting, Sakuta and Tomoe sat on the beach, watching a five-or six-year-old boy and girl playing with a beach ball.

The girl’s powerful attacks had the boy reeling. He caught the ball with his face a lot.

“Senpai...”

“You hungry again?”

“Thanks for your help.”

“.....”

“Okay,” Tomoe said, holding out her hand. “Let’s shake.”

“On what?”

“Good-byes.”

Sakuta wiped his hand on his T-shirt and took her hand. It felt very small.

“Ultimately, you still carried a candle for Sakurajima. I couldn’t deal with that, so I broke up with you,” Tomoe said, gazing out to sea like she was reading a story out loud.

“We don’t have to do the slap thing?”

“Let’s not and say we did. If I slapped you here, it would just be mega ungrateful.”

“Okay. Well...best of luck?”

He’d never been in a situation like this before, so he wasn’t really sure what to say.

“Mm.”

“Have a good vacation.”

“You, too. I hope Sakurajima says yes.”

“I’m very tenacious.”

Tomoe let go of his hand and stood.

“I’d better get going,” she said, smiling.

“Yeah, all this swimming really wore me out.” Sakuta staggered to his feet.

“You sound like an old man!” Tomoe laughed.

They headed to the lockers to get their things.

Once they’d changed, they boarded the Enoden and headed back to Fujisawa Station.

“You have plans for summer vacation, senpai?”

“I’m gonna do a whole lot of nothing.”

They chatted about nothing in particular...

Not one innuendo.

Friendly and fun to the very end.

A thoroughly enjoyable day, like one spent with a very good friend.

And thus their lie ended, without any students figuring it out.

And the joys of summer vacation arrived.

It all worked out because of you, senpai.

Now I'm okay.

I'll be okay.

But...

...because you were here for me, I may have made one mistake.



Laplace's mini-Demon

1

His body was shaking. Being shaken.

“Wake up! It’s morning!”

Sakuta answered his sister’s call by sitting up.

“Morning.”

“Good morning!”

He rubbed his eyes.

“Uh, Kaede...”

“Yes?”

“There’s this thing called summer vacation...”

He was allowed to sleep in today. The only people who woke up bright and early on the first day of vacation were small children headed out to do radio calisthenics.

“But that’s tomorrow!” Kaede said, looking baffled.

“.....”

What did she just say?

“No, it’s today.”

“No...definitely tomorrow.”

He grabbed his clock. The digital screen said July 18. Friday. If Sakuta’s memories were correct, that should have been yesterday...

July 18 was, like Kaede said, not yet summer vacation.

It was the last day of the term.

“.....”

Just when he’d thought he was safe, the day was looping again. The first time since June 27.

But somehow, he wasn't surprised.

Somewhere deep down, he may have had a hunch.

Something had felt slightly off during his time with Tomoe.

She'd seemed to be having a great time at the beach yesterday. They'd parted with a smile, like she had not a care in the world.

But that was exactly what was wrong.

It was too easy.

"....."

Sakuta got out of bed and went to the living room. He flipped on the TV, and they were reporting the results of last night's pro baseball Fresh All-Star game.

The same thing he'd seen yesterday, on the first July 18.

It was weirdly comforting.

"Something wrong?"

"How would you like some watermelon, Kaede?"

"Huh? I'd love some."

"I'll make sure to bring a round one home."

They ate breakfast, and he got ready for school.

"Have fun!"

Kaede waved him out the door, and Sakuta began his second July 18.

He ran into Yuuma on the Enoden.

Yuuma came over and grabbed a strap next to him.

"You got summer plans, Sakuta?"

"Work."

"Koga's there, too!"

Exactly as he'd remembered it. Even Yuuma's grin was the same.

"You, Kunimi?"

“Work, practice, dates.”

“The essence of youth.”

“You’re one to talk!” Yuuma laughed and bumped his shoulder exactly as he had before.

Everything was just like the first July 18.

Sakuta and Yuuma split up at the shoe cubbies, but instead of heading upstairs to class, he headed right to Class 1-4. Tomoe’s class.

He looked around the room and found her right away. She was at a table with Rena, Hinako, and Aya, chatting away happily.

Hinako spotted him and nudged Tomoe.

She looked surprised. But then she joined him in the hall, looking slightly self-conscious.

“You can’t just drop by my class!” she said, checking to see if anyone was watching.

“I know, but I don’t have much choice.”

The situation was what it was. Best to touch base right away.

“Did something go wrong?” he asked.

As far as he knew, everything had gone great. Exactly as planned, everything working out. They’d made it all the way to summer vacation without anyone the wiser. All Tomoe had to do was tell her friends she’d dumped him. That information would spread through the school without any further help from them. It should all have been over.

“Why?” Tomoe asked, confused.

“Um.” Sakuta paused. Her reaction wasn’t adding up. She didn’t seem the least bit worried.

“We’re looping again.”

“Huh?” Tomoe gaped at him.

That clinched it. She definitely didn’t know.

A shudder ran up his spine.

“This is the second today, right?”

“...No,” Tomoe said gravely.

“So wait. This is your first time?”

“Yes,” she answered, looking him right in the eye.

The bell rang, signaling the start of homeroom.

“Right. Well, forget I said anything.”

“After school?”

“As planned.”

“R-right.”

“Later.”

Sakuta turned to go. Tomoe waved after him, looking a little worried.

After the end-of-term ceremony, they had the final homeroom, and the teacher handed him the report card. He already knew what it said. His grades hadn't changed. The vague comment addressing his fight with Maesawa was there, too.

“I know it's summer, but don't get carried away and hurt yourselves.”

With these thoughtful words behind him, Sakuta left Class 2-1. Class 2-2 had wrapped up already, so there were only a few people still in the room.

No sign of Rio Futaba. She was probably where she always was.

Sakuta headed for the science lab and found her. She was writing a formula on the blackboard.

He launched immediately into an explanation of the time loop.

“What do you think?” he asked at last.

“Azusagawa, are you insane?” inquired Rio, turning around.

“Why, exactly?”

“The fact that you even have to ask...”

“Please elaborate.”

“A child could get this one.”

“.....”

Children these days were very perceptive. The country’s future was secure.

“If you’re right and that first-year...”

“Tomoe Koga.”

“If she’s Laplace’s demon, then the answer is obvious.”

“It is?”

“What’s the key difference between July 18 and July 19? Any changes to, say, her relationship with you?”

“.....”

Her observational skills were something else. Sakuta hadn’t explained a thing about his fake relationship contract with Tomoe, but Rio seemed to have it all worked out.

“I knew you wouldn’t keep something like that going indefinitely.”

She knew him well.

“Azusagawa, are you sure you haven’t noticed?”

“Noticed what?”

“The reason she rolled the dice again.”

Sakuta looked up at the ceiling, avoiding Rio’s gaze.

“.....”

He wasn’t completely clueless. Given the choice between having clues and having no clues, he would have to say the former. But that was a far cry from actually knowing.

“But this time around, Koga doesn’t know it’s the second time.”

That was what confused him.

She’d looked genuinely surprised, and that was terrifying. A chill in the pit of

his stomach.

“Hmm... Then maybe it’s what I originally said, and you’re the demon.”

Rio didn’t seem interested either way. But as ready as she was to call him a demon, she didn’t seem to believe what she was saying. It was more like she put it out there for the sake of argument.

“I’m not.”

“Then there’s only one other possibility.”

“Only one?”

“Yes. She’s lying.”

Sakuta did not disagree.

Sakuta left the science lab, met Tomoe at the station, and headed for the beach. Just like last time, they ate corn on the cob and *yakisoba*, made castles on the beach, bought shaved ice, and had fun swimming.

Tomoe seemed to enjoy it all.

On the way home, she thanked him for everything. Their handshake at the end was the same as the first July 18.

Nothing changed.

If tomorrow came, he’d have nothing to complain about.

But when Sakuta work up the next morning, it was Friday, July 18, again.

His third last day of the term.

Sakuta’s summer vacation just would not arrive.

On June 27, he’d escaped without a fourth round.

Based on that experience, Sakuta started out the day the same way. Wondering if maybe there was a three-day limit.

Unaware of the loop, Tomoe had a great time at the beach again.

But Sakuta's faint hopes were dashed when the fourth July 18 arrived.

Clearly, the only way out of this was to banish Laplace's demon.

He got on the train like always and ran into Yuuma yet again.

"Yo."

"Mm." Sakuta answered Yuuma's pleasant smile with a scowl.

Yuuma grabbed a strap next to him, unperturbed.

They watched the town go by for a while.

"Kunimi," Sakuta said, at last.

"Mm?"

"You've got a girlfriend."

"And I'm grateful for it."

"What would you do if another girl had feelings for you?"

"....."

A look of caution appeared in Yuuma's eyes.

"What would you do if you realized how she felt?" Sakuta asked.

"Who are we talking about?" Yuuma gave him a sidelong stare, probing.

"Purely hypothetical."

"Sure it is."

Sakuta had included no specifics, but Yuuma was taking this awfully seriously. That suggested only one thing.

Yuuma knew exactly how Rio felt.

That was why he was giving Sakuta's question the gravity it deserved.

"Does she...know I know?"

"Not at the moment."

Neither checked to see who they were talking about.

"At the moment," Yuuma proceeded, wincing. "I don't want to dig up feelings

when she's hiding them." He kept his gaze on the sea in front of them.

Squinting into the light.

"I feel like it would just be conceited, you know? Like, who do I think I am?"

Yuuma was choosing his words carefully.

"But I don't think letting things stand as they are is healthy in the long run. What should I do?"

"I'm the one asking."

They reached Shichirigahama Station without either of them finding an answer.

All students gathered in the gym for the end-of-term ceremony. Sakuta's fourth time sitting through it. His fourth time hearing the principal's speech, so he tuned it out, thinking about something else.

About Tomoe.

He could see her sitting with the other first-years.

She must have sensed him watching, because she glanced back.

When their eyes met, she looked surprised. But then she smiled.

When he saw that, it felt like everything was falling into place.

Yes. She's lying.

Tomoe *was* lying.

After school, Sakuta and Tomoe met up at Shichirigahama Station and rode three stops to Enoshima Station, talking about their grades.

They walked down the bricks of Subana Street to the sea. They used the tunnel to cross under Route 134.

And Sakuta went straight on to Enoshima.

"Senpai? The beach is this way?"

Tomoe pointed left. The Eastside beach, with all its stalls and lockers. To the right was the Westside beach.

“This is my fourth today.”

“So you’re sick of the beach?”

“Glad you read the air so well,” he said.

He stepped onto Benten Bridge.

“We’re going to Enoshima?” Tomoe asked. She caught up, light on her feet, and leaned in to look at his face.

“We never made it there on our first date, did we?”

“Oh, right.”

They’d stopped halfway across the bridge, and Tomoe had spotted a classmate in trouble. That girl...Nana Yoneyama had lost a phone strap. She and her friends had all bought matching ones, so she’d been desperate to find it.

“The island. The sky. The ocean.”

Ahead of them, the sky and sea framed Enoshima. Those three things were all the eye could see.

Tomoe reached out her hands as if trying to reach the sky.

There was a kite wheeling through the air above. This bird was often responsible for beachgoers losing their meals.

The bridge was over four hundred yards across, and when they finally reached the other end, they were met with the usual tourist-trap array of souvenir shops, as well as stalls run by local fishermen. This place was bustling this time of year.

Once through the torii gate, the path went uphill—and wasn’t exactly a gentle slope. The road narrowed, the look evoking days of yore. On either side were shops selling all kinds of things, from whitebait (a local specialty) to colorful wallets with metal clasps.

They passed a college couple sharing a giant rice cracker with an octopus baked into it.

Sakuta felt eyes on him.

“All this stall food is bad for you,” he said, but he handed the stall owner

some money.

“I’m starting a diet tomorrow.”

“Oh?”

They talked as they waited for the octopus cracker to fry.

“This is huge!” Tomoe marveled. It was bigger than their heads.

They continued up the path, taking turns breaking pieces off the cracker.

Ahead of them was a towering staircase with a red torii gate in the middle. Above that were the three shrines of Enoshima Shrine.

Sakuta and Tomoe stuffed the rest of the cracker into their mouths while outside the gate, then made their way up the stairs.

This was hard enough work that they both fell silent, focusing on keeping their feet moving. By the time they reached the first shrine, Hetsumiya, they were both out of breath.

“My legs are quivering.”

“But you’re a first-year!”

“What’s that got to do with it?”

“You have youth!”

Once they caught their breath, they both paid their respects.

“Koga, they got wish plaques for matchmaking.”

There were a ton of wooden plaques dangling from the stands around the matchmaking tree.

“Let’s write one.”

“Huh? Isn’t that lying to the goddess?”

Sakuta ignored Tomoe and bought an *ema* plaque from the shrine maiden.

“S-Senpai!”

The maiden must have thought Tomoe was just embarrassed. She gave her a big smile.

Sakuta borrowed a pen and wrote his full name inside the heart. *Sakuta Azusagawa*.

“See?”

“It’s bad luck!”

“We were ready to go to hell the moment we decided to fool everyone.”

“I was, sure. But I don’t want to drag you down with me!”

Tomoe hesitated, then flipped the plaque over. The backside of it was a list of types of relationships the prayer would affect. And the first one was “unrequited love.”

He heard her gasp.

Tomoe hesitated for a moment, then took the pen. She wrote *Tomoe Koga* in round letters next to his name. Sakuta snatched it out of her hands and started tying it to the racks at the matchmaking tree.

“Senpai! We can’t put a lie in with all these real prayers. I’m taking this home with me.”

She tugged his arm, desperate to stop him. He was worried the shrine maiden might overhear.

“I’m the only one lying here, so we’re good.”

“Huh?”

Her arms went limp. Sakuta seized his chance and finished tying the plaque. It would be pretty hard to get it off.

They climbed more stairs in silence, like this was a religious exercise. They paid their respects at Nakatsumiya, with its distinctive red pillars. A little farther on, they found themselves at the base of the landmark observation tower.

Sakuta and Tomoe passed right by it, heading for Okutsumiya at the back of the island.

An old-fashioned stone-paved path, quite narrow. It definitely set the mood. Stairs frequently took them up and down, and there were several souvenir stands, Japanese sweet shops, and restaurants.

It was like something out of an old movie. It had that pleasant, comfy vibe you get when everyone knows their neighbors. The occasional cat scurried past, and Tomoe tried to pet them all, but to no avail.

“Senpai, earlier...”

“Mm?”

“The matchmaking tree.”

“.....”

“Oh, never mind.”

“.....”

He knew what she wanted.

She wanted to ask about what he’d said earlier.

“I’m the only one lying here, so we’re good.”

He could tell this was eating at her, but Tomoe kept her mouth tightly shut. They reached Okutsumiya without her saying another word.

They paid their respects in silence. He glanced at her profile as she clasped her hands together, and she looked very serious. What was she praying for?

The path grew even narrower. They went down a long, narrow staircase and reached the Western edge of Enoshima—Chigogafuchi.

A rocky marine plateau a little over fifty yards wide, where the waves mingled with the rocks, smoothing the surfaces. Supposedly, this place rose out of the water during the Great Kanto earthquake.

It was a clear day, and they had a great view of Mount Fuji. It was a sight to behold.

The sea breeze eased their exhaustion. Lots of other couples had stopped to gaze at the strange formations nature had created.

“Hinako said this place is lovely at sunset,” Tomoe said, with both hands on the rail.

She’d probably figured it out.

Why he'd invited her to Enoshima.

And why he'd said what he said.

And she was pretending she hadn't noticed.

"Let's go."

"Mm."

Her answers were getting shorter and shorter.

They headed back the way they'd come in silence.

Neither of them said much.

The path up had been a real workout, but it was much easier going down. They passed through that first torii gate again, into the bustling shopping area. Stall keepers called out to them, but they kept moving, leaving Enoshima behind.

On the way back across Benten Bridge, they had a clear view of the beaches in either direction. The orientation was reversed, and the Westside beach was on their left, with the Eastside beach on their right. The sun was high in the sky to the south, and the beaches were packed. A decent number of Minegahara students must have come straight here after the end-of-term ceremony. Like Sakuta and Tomoe had planned to do.

"Senpai, you still wanna hit the beach?" Tomoe asked, looking along it. "*I am* wearing a swimsuit under this."

There was an excited bounce to her voice. She sounded just like her usual self.

That made up his mind. Sakuta stopped in his tracks.

Tomoe noticed a moment later and turned around three yards away, shooting him a puzzled look. They were right in the center of Benten Bridge, surrounded by ocean.

"Senpai?"

"Koga, the lie has to end."

"Huh? Oh yeah. Today's the last day."

“Not that one.”

“...Senpai? You’re scaring me.”

She gave him a baffled look.

“.....”

But Sakuta didn’t relent.

“Uh...what’s going on?”

“You think I didn’t notice?”

“What are we talking about?”

“It might have been fake, but we’ve been going out for three weeks.”

“.....”

“You once said I can read the air but don’t.”

“You’re being really weird, senpai,” she protested, at a loss.

“You don’t have to say it for me to know.”

“.....”

“You know it’s true,” he said.

She’d met his gaze this whole time, but now she hung her head.

“No matter how many times you roll the dice, people’s feelings don’t change.”

“.....”

“A lie won’t become the truth, and the truth won’t become a lie.”

In response, Tomoe tightly gripped the sleeves of her uniform. Like she was barely holding on.

“...Even after a hundred times?” she croaked, staring at her feet. The sea breeze snatched her words away.

“No.”

“.....Even a thousand?”

Her voice shook.

“Nope.”

“Ten thousand?”

“You could go a million times. I’d still be in love with Mai.”

“.....”

“And no matter how many times we repeat, your feelings won’t change, either.”

“.....”

“.....”

A weighty silence settled over them.

Large drops of rain began falling, and the dry ground turned dark.

He looked up, and the sky was still blue. It was a sun-shower.

“You’re a liar, senpai,” Tomoe said, her voice almost lost in the patter of the rain. “...Feelings do change.”

The drops were so big they hurt, and the volume of them was only getting worse.

“Each time we repeat, they get stronger. Grew stronger.”

Her voice hoarse, Tomoe admitted the lie she’d told herself. Tomoe knew they were repeating the day. She knew it but had acted just like she had the first time. The second and third passes through July 18, she’d had a great time at the beach as if she had no idea. But it was all an act.

All to hide these feelings.

“I knew I had to forget, but I couldn’t. Each time I thought, ‘This time I’ll do it.’ But it didn’t work. No matter how much I wanted not to feel this way!”

The quaver in her voice hit Sakuta like a knife to the chest.

All the emotions she’d had bottled up inside her were starting to come out. These feelings were so very human. No demon could have anything like them.

“We were supposed to have a great time on our last date and end the fake

relationship with a smile. And after we broke up, you and Sakurajima were going to get together, and when second term started, I was going to tease you mercilessly about it.”

“Koga...”

“And we’d be friends. The kind of friends who can talk about anything. You’d be an older friend I could rely on. And I knew you’d like that, too. We’d talk about everything that happened, even this fake relationship, like it was all a lot of fun. And we’d stay friends forever!”

Tomoe looked up, tried to smile, and failed.

“That’s what I want.”

The pain on her face squeezed at his heart.

“That’s all I want. I didn’t want anything special. I didn’t want to be selfish. I didn’t want to make trouble for anyone. So... So why won’t tomorrow come?!”

“.....”

“I made up my mind to put an end to these feelings, so why do I wake up in the morning to find them even stronger than the day before?!”

Because that’s how it works. Hiding them deep within you doesn’t make them go away. They aren’t going to just fade out. Those feelings live on in the depths of your heart.

The more you try to deny them, the harder it is to get them out of your mind.

“This is just awful...”

Human memories and feelings aren’t digital. You can’t erase them with the flip of a switch. They aren’t like phone numbers, e-mail addresses, or app IDs. You can’t just hit delete and be done. Humans are bound together in other ways. The three weeks Sakuta and Tomoe had spent together had connected them.

“I made up my mind to get rid of these feelings. I made that choice!”

“You don’t have to do that.”

“I do!”

Tomoe lived the way she did. No matter how much doing so made her suffer.

“I mean, you’re in love with Sakurajima! I’m just in the way. These aren’t feelings friends have! A friend has no business feeling like this!”

That was what Sakuta had asked of her.

“When the lie ends, we stay friends.”

Tomoe had made up her mind to hide her feelings so she could live up to that request. She had no other choice. She didn’t want to be a burden to him.

That’s why she’d said nothing and tried to handle it on her own. Tried to stifle her feelings. Make it like they were never there. That was what she had to do to be his friend.

To be by his side, as a slightly younger friend, a cheeky little kohai.

But her feelings wouldn’t cooperate, and trying to make it all work the way she wanted proved impossible.

Some emotions are too strong to control. And we don’t always fully understand our own feelings.

This might be the first time Tomoe ever had to face emotions like these.

Their relationship had begun as a lie.

But before she knew it, her feelings were true. They’d become real.

Even so, it was a lie, so she’d taken the day of the breakup in stride...but those true feelings stayed with her. Powerful emotions locked inside, unresolved. Unable to air them out, trapped in the darkness inside her, those feelings pleaded with her.

But Tomoe wouldn’t let herself listen. If she let her emotions out, it would make trouble. Trouble for Sakuta. To be the Tomoe Koga he wanted her to be, her only option was to kill these feelings. To trample them down, to bury them inside.

This was painful, devastating, and inescapable. It awakened the sleeping demon within.

This was the demon’s true form. It was the Tomoe she’d trapped inside

herself. The part of her that didn't want summer vacation to come. That wanted to keep dating Sakuta, even if it was a lie. That hoped tomorrow would never arrive.

But even then, Tomoe stayed silent, trying to forget him. Tried to make it so this never happened. That's why she'd lied.

"Koga."

When he spoke, she flinched.

But even if this hurt her, he had to say it.

"You've been making trouble for me the whole time."

"You're so mean..."

"You just noticed?"

"I don't like you. I hate you! This is all your fault! If you hadn't been so damn nice to me..."

"Yeah. So you don't need to worry about being a burden."

"I hate myself, too. This isn't who I am!"

"It is, though. This is part of you, Koga."

"No! It's not me! I want summer to come! I want to be friends with you, have fun, laugh together! That's all I want!"

Tomoe still hadn't shed a single tear. Her eyes glistened as she looked back at him. Like if she let the tears flow, it would all be over.

"Don't lie to yourself anymore."

"....."

"You're the schoolgirl of justice, remember?"

"That's not fair. If you put it that way..."

"There's nothing you can't do, Koga."

"That's not fair. You're not fair."

"You don't need to bottle it up anymore."

“You’re so dumb! You’re an idiot! I hate you! I can’t stand you! But...”

The pain in her voice was clear.

“But...I also love you.”

The tears welled up.

“I love you, senpai.”

She sniffed, then took a deep breath.

“I love you!” she shouted. Letting all the emotions she’d trapped within free. Unleashing all of them, right in his face.

A torrent of pure emotion echoed across the sky.

“Koga,” he said softly. As gently as he knew how.

For a moment, Tomoe tried to hold back the tears. But Sakuta’s words wouldn’t let her.

“Well done,” he said.

Her face crumpled. The tears flowed, glittering on her cheeks.

“Good job.”

She sobbed wordlessly. The ground at her feet turned wet from her tears.

The blue sky watched them without a word, clear as far as the eye could see.

The sun-shower had long since stopped.



the world you chose

His eyes could tell it was getting brighter even though they were closed. Sakuta realized he must be awake.

The sunlight streaming through the gap in the curtains left cloudlike shadows on the ceiling of his room. The familiar feel of his bed assured him he was in his own room.

He reached for the digital alarm clock.

If the loop had ended, this should be July 19. Summer vacation.

Sakuta checked the display to be sure.

“.....”

It took his eyes a few seconds to focus on the number. July 19? Or July 18 again? But the number shown was totally different.

“Huh?”

Sakuta jumped up and ran into the living room. He turned on the TV.

The morning news was just beginning.

“And a big win for the Japan team!”

That was very familiar. He’d heard that phrase before. The male newscaster was very enthusiastic.

“Good morning. Today is Friday, June 27. Our top story today is the results of yesterday’s big game.”

The screen started showing a World Cup game held on the other side of the world. A highlight reel of the second game of the group stage.

As the first half drew to a close, Japan was one point behind. Japanese player number ten dribbled into enemy territory and was taken down by some aggressive defense. Whistles blew.

Just outside the penalty box, so a free-kick chance. Number four took the kick. A short run up, a shot, the keeper dove the wrong way, and the ball hit the net. Number four roared, and the Japan team flocked to him, celebrating.

That point put momentum on Japan’s side, and they scored a follow-up in the

second half, winning 2–1.

As Sakuta watched the extended coverage, his thoughts turned to one person.

Tomoe Koga.

A kohai from the year below him and Laplace's demon "She's kind of amazing..." he said, the words escaping his lips. "It *was* all a simulation of the future, then."

Just as Rio had suggested. The repeating days weren't because they were going back in time. It was all a calculation of the future from one point in time.

And in this case, that point was June 27.

What else could Sakuta do but laugh?

He and Kaede ate breakfast, and he got ready for school like always.

It was the end of June, and the rainy season was not yet over. The sun beating down wasn't nearly as hot as it had been in the July of the day before, but it was much more humid.

"Sup, Sakuta. Another amazing bed head."

"This hairstyle's all the rage these days."

"You're on the cutting edge of fashion."

Yuuma laughed. This was just like it had been on the previous June 27.

"....."

"Something wrong, Sakuta?"

".....No."

"Seriously, what?"

"That handsome face of yours is infuriating."

"Huh? This again?"

"Agh, it's terrible."

Morning classes were math, physics, English, and Modern Japanese. During

math, the teacher said, “This’ll be on the exam!” The physics teacher’s bad pun still dropped dead. Third-period English earned him another “Mr. Azusagawa, listen to me” for not paying attention, and he was forced to read aloud. And once again, the Modern Japanese teacher had lipstick on his shirt collar.

Each detail further proved that Sakuta had experienced a projection of the future.

Lunch arrived.

Sakuta and Mai were alone together in an empty classroom on the third floor.

The window was slightly open, and a sultry sea breeze blew in. The curtains swayed slightly. It was a moment of peace.

They sat on opposite sides of a desk with the lunch Mai had made for Sakuta spread out between them. Fried chicken, egg rolls, potato salad, cherry tomatoes, and a side of *hijiki* seaweed and soybeans. Sakuta tried each in turn and told her how good they were.

Mai seemed thoroughly satisfied with the opportunity to prove her culinary skills.

Once they finished eating, Sakuta sat up straight.

“Mai,” he said.

“Mm?” She looked up, chopsticks between her lips.

“I love you. Please go out with me.”

“.....”

She looked away. She picked some egg roll out of her lunch and ate it.

“.....”

She chewed for a while.

“.....”

He waited until she swallowed, but still no answer came.

“You’re just gonna ignore it?!”

“I’m just not feeling the magic,” she said with a bored sigh. “You say the same

thing to me every day for a month, and it just loses all meaning.”

“Oh...rejection? Then I’ll just have to search elsewhere for love.”

“Wha...?”

“Thank you for everything.”

He bowed his head and gave a heartbroken sigh.

“I—I didn’t say no! Why are you giving up?” Mai asked, giving him a reproachful glare.

“Then is it a yes?”

“Urgh...you’ve got a lot of nerve.”

“Is that a yes?”

He stuck to his guns. One last push.

“.....Mm,” she said, nodding. Her voice barely above a whisper. “It’s a yes.”

As if trying to cover her embarrassment, Mai quickly started eating an egg roll. This was adorable. Sakuta decided to press his advantage and make sure of one other thing.

“So.”

“What?”

“What are your feelings for me?”

“Well, obviously...”

The cherry tomato slipped from her chopsticks.

“Obviously?”

“What does it matter?”

“I’m asking because it does.”

“Sakuta, give it up.”

“This is very important.”

“You have to hear it?”

“From your own lips.”

A cherry tomato passed through those lips. She chewed for a while, then swallowed.

“I’m only saying this once.”

“Okay.”

“.....”

“.....”

There was a brief silence. Mai took a deep breath.

Then her eyes suddenly turned to the window. “Oh,” she said.

“Mm?”

Sakuta turned to look. All he could see were the sands of Shichirigahama, the sea, and the sky. Nothing out of the ordinary. Big summer clouds streaming by.

Then a sweet scent enveloped him. A shadow fell over his eyes. Before he knew it, something soft pressed against his cheek.

Surprised, he turned back toward her.

“Does that clear things up?”

Mai shot him a mischievous smile, only slightly embarrassed.

Sakuta reached up and felt his cheeks, certain that sensation had been Mai’s lips.

“I’d have preferred mouth to mouth.”

“Don’t push your luck.”

Under the desk, Mai stepped on his foot. It didn’t hurt a bit.

“Stop grinning!”

“That’s your fault, Mai.”

The two of them savored their time together.

When the bell rang, his lunch date with Mai was tragically brought to a close. Sakuta went down the hall alone, heading back to the second-year classrooms.

As he passed the stairs, he saw a familiar face on the landing.

Tomoe Koga.

She was with that third-year, Maesawa.

Things seemed tense, so Sakuta hid himself against the wall.

“I’m sorry,” Tomoe said, bowing her head. “I can’t go out with you.”

“You don’t have a boyfriend, though?”



“No.”

“You in love with someone else, then?”

“Yeah.”

Tomoe nodded.

“He on the team with me?”

“No.”

“Then...”

“He’s a caveman who doesn’t even own a phone.”

As she said this, Tomoe’s face lit up like a flower blooming.

“Huh?” Maesawa just sounded baffled. Still, he shrugged, said, “Well, maybe some other time,” whatever that meant, and turned to head up the stairs.

Sakuta stepped out and walked right past him, expressionless. He headed down the stairs.

Tomoe saw him coming.

“Eavesdropping’s a crime,” she said.

Sakuta knew instantly she remembered everything.

“I just happened to pass by.”

“Hmph.”

“Also, I’m not a caveman.”

“I wasn’t talking about *you*.” Tomoe puffed up her cheeks. “Being that self-absorbed is so not cool.”

He’d broken her heart only a day before, but she’d already rebounded enough to interact with him like this—a testament to her inner strength. This situation was her doing.

“Senpai, are you ready to accept the consequences?”

“Hmm?”

“If Rena ends up hating me because of this and I lose my place in class...”

“How is that my problem?”

“Well, the whole thing’s your fault.”

“Please explain.”

“You made a woman out of me.”

“That sounds damningly scandalous.”

“You know what I mean, but you always make a joke out of it. Is it because you’re secretly embarrassed?”

She grinned like she saw right through him. This smug attitude annoyed him a bit, but given that arguing the point would just prove her right, he steered the conversation back on track.

“Well, if anything happens to you, Koga, I’ll be your friend for life.”

Then he put his hand on her head.

“So at least you won’t be alone.”

“I’m the one willing to be your best friend,” she countered. Even cheekier.

Sakuta knew she woke up at six to get her hair right, so he deliberately messed it up.

“Augh! Don’t!”

He didn’t stop until the bell rang.

From there until summer vacation began was astonishing.

The days Sakuta and Tomoe had experienced played out the same way.

The Japan soccer team made it out of the group stage. Solid play took them to the quarterfinals. There, they suffered a painful loss, but these results let the world know Japan was a real contender.

Closer to home, the content on the final exams was exactly the same. Sakuta had taken all these tests before. And they’d gone over all the answers once, so his scores were excellent.

He felt mildly guilty about that, but considering all the trouble Adolescence Syndrome had put him through, this felt like a decent way of making up for it.

Also, Tomoe ended up working part-time with him at the restaurant.

Saki Kamisato called him to the rooftop that same Saturday.

Many of his interactions with Mai were the same. She still brought clothes over for Kaede, went to Kagoshima for a week filming a TV show, called him from there, showed up and forced him to study, and even agreed to change into the bunny-girl outfit while he did.

There were some minor differences, since he wasn't faking a relationship with Tomoe, but without exception, the events he remembered came to pass.

This was more than enough evidence to suggest the version of June 27 to July 18 the two of them experienced was no mere dream, but an accurate projection of the future.

One day after school, in the science lab, he talked this over with Rio.

"If that's true, it's certainly astonishing."

"You think I'm lying?"

"Azusagawa...in this projected future, you managed to convince the whole school you were dating a first-year, so I think you could lie convincingly about this, too."

Sakuta didn't see any point in insisting she should believe him.

"But it does make some sense," Rio said absently. "A girl who wants to fit in so badly she spends all her time desperately reading others, and before she knows it, she can even read the future."

At least, it made sense to her.

But the one thing that puzzled Sakuta was how he'd come to get mixed up in her Adolescence Syndrome. While seven billion other people never noticed anything wrong, never realized they were repeating the same day.

When he asked Rio about it, she just said "Quantum entanglement" like he was supposed to know what that meant.

"Quantums entangle?" he asked.

"Yes. You see?"

“Not a whit.”

“A what?”

“I mean I don’t have the foggiest clue what you mean.”

“Hmph.”

Rio wrote *whit* on the blackboard to look up later.

“So what is quantum entanglement?”

“A spooky phenomenon in which two particles in separate locations instantly share information without any intermediary.”

“Do particles have cell phones?”

“Those count as intermediaries.”

“Then they’re telepathic?”

“Exactly.”

“Seriously?”

He’d intended that to be a joke.

“In fact, world-famous professors have done research on whether they can apply the principles of quantum entanglement to realize actual telepathy.”

“Again, are you serious?”

“Quantum entanglement itself is a verified phenomenon.”

“So you think Koga and I became entangled and synched up that way?”

Rio nodded.

“But why were we entangled?”

“Quantum entanglement occurs after the particles collide. Did you and that first-year collide recently?”

In a sense, yes.

“We kicked each other’s butts.”

“.....”

“.....”

“Azusagawa.”

“What?”

“I would like to replicate this effect. Present your hindquarters.”

“Nope.”

“Come on, hurry up, rascal.”

“That’s no way to ask for a favor!”

Rio looked genuinely disappointed. Perhaps she’d actually meant it.

As for Tomoe after rejecting Maesawa...well, like she’d predicted, she was driven out of Rena’s group.

Sakuta found her the Wednesday after, sitting on the stairs to the roof, eating lunch alone.

He sat down next to her, and they ate together.

“Should I come to the bathroom with you, too?”

“That would make it worse.”

“Ask me any time.”

“Seriously, that’s creepy. Do I have to report you?”

This continued through Thursday and Friday, but on the first day of final exams, he saw Tomoe talking to another classmate on the train in to school. Not Rena, Hinako, or Aya. The reason he knew she was a first-year in Tomoe’s class was because in the projection of the future, Sakuta had met her.

On his first date with Tomoe, they’d helped a girl with glasses find her phone strap. Her name was Nana Yoneyama.

Nana took her phone out, and he saw the jellyfish strap hanging from it, the one Tomoe had gotten soaking wet to retrieve.

Sakuta guessed Tomoe had gone and helped her search again. Proving that notion was the fact that she’d caught a cold again, on the exact same day as before.

At work after exams, Tomoe said, "I've made some new friends."

"The girl with the phone strap?"

"Yep. And Nana let me join her group in class."

"That's nice."

"Yeah."

Tomoe seemed a little sheepish but very happy.

"All thanks to you."

"I didn't do a thing."

Tomoe's own good behavior had proved her salvation.

With a personality like hers, he didn't think it would take her all that long to patch things over with Rena, either.

"But because of you, I got through this without having to lie, so...thank you."

In a sense, she meant that literally. She hadn't lied to anyone this time. But in another sense, he thought she was talking about lying to herself.

With his concerns all resolved, the days passed peacefully.

The end-of-term ceremony arrived.

The principal made his grand speech, and the teacher handed out report cards.

After homeroom, he waited for Mai at the shoe cubbies, and they left together. Lately, Mai had been out of school for work a lot, so it had actually been two whole weeks since they'd been able to leave together like this.

When they stepped onto the train at Shichirigahama Station, Mai held out her hand expectantly.

He tried to take it, but she snatched it away.

"Show me your report card."

"Then say that."

"Just do it."

“I’d prefer not to.”

“Why?”

“Why do you want to see it?”

“You’re going to the same college as me, right?”

“That’s what I put on the class survey...”

“Then go on.”

She held out her hand again. No getting out of this one. Sakuta forking over his report card was a forgone conclusion.

“If it’s better than you think, do I get a reward?”

“If your average is higher than a seven, I’ll listen to any one request you make.”

Minegahara grades were on a ten-point scale. Anyone scoring over a seven was doing very well.

“That’s a tall order,” Sakuta said.

He glumly handed over his report card.

She looked down at it, clearly surprised.

“Er...how?”

He hadn’t actually crunched the numbers, but the average was probably over seven. This was all thanks to Laplace’s demon. He would have to buy Tomoe lunch later. After all, Mai had to accept a request from him now.

“Soooo, what should I have you do?”

“If it’s too weird, I’ll break up with you,” Mai said preemptively.

She handed his report card back.

“Then will you come over tonight and make dinner?”

“Is that all?”

Having a girlfriend come over to cook dinner was a top-tier event in his mind. Especially if it was Mai Sakurajima. This seemed lost on her, though.

“I just want to see you in an apron.”

“I never wear an apron to cook.”

“Aww.”

“Okay, okay, I’ll put one on.”

“We could go straight to the naked apron.”

“I could add laxatives to everything.”

“I’m kidding.”

“You were not.”

Her eyes bored through him, and he did his best to laugh it off.

“Should we stop by the grocery store on the way home?”

“Let’s.”

Sakuta was thrilled to get another shopping date.

After buying groceries at the store near Fujisawa Station, Sakuta and Mai stepped outside to find it raining. The skies were blue, but it was coming down pretty hard. Quite a sun-shower.

“Sakuta, you have an umbrella?”

“I do.”

He pulled it out of his schoolbag and opened it. Mai stepped under it with him.

“I’ll hold one of those,” she said.

Sakuta’s right hand was holding up the umbrella, but on his left side, he had both his schoolbag slung over his shoulder and a plastic grocery bag with green onions sticking out dangling from his hand.

“I’ve got it.”

“You’re sure?”

He kept the umbrella angled so Mai would stay dry as they walked.

“Mai, what are you gonna make?”

“It’s a secret. It’s no fun if I tell you now.”

“Fair.”

At this point, they were in sight of the park a few minutes from his apartment building.

As they were passing by, Mai suddenly stopped.

“What’s with that girl?”

Sakuta followed her gaze.

A girl with a red umbrella was standing just inside the entrance, by the grass. She was wearing a uniform from a local junior high. It looked pretty new still, so she must’ve been a first-year.

How long had she been there? Her shoulders and legs were soaking wet.

When he looked closer, he saw a cardboard box hidden in the grass.

Mai started walking in her direction, so Sakuta was forced to follow.

“What’s wrong?” Mai asked.

The girl turned toward them, her face emerging from beneath the umbrella.

The moment he saw her face, something felt wrong. No, not “wrong,” exactly. It was like he’d met this red umbrella girl before. Or she reminded him of someone he knew.

“Um, this kitten...,” the girl whimpered, her voice very faint.

She looked down at the cardboard box again. There was a kitten curled up inside, shivery from the cold and wet.

The girl was clearly worried about the kitten but had no idea what to do about it.

“Mai, can you hold the umbrella?”

“Sure.”

She took it from him. Sakuta bent down and picked the kitten up with one hand.

“I’ll take it home with me. If it gets better, great; if not, I’ll take it to the vet.”

“Okay. Oh, but...”

“Mm?”

“I want to adopt it.”

“Oh, then...”

Sakuta gave the girl his phone number. She punched it into her cell phone.

“Is that right?” she asked, showing him the screen.

“Yep. My name’s Sakuta Azusagawa. Same Azusagawa as the highway rest area chain. Sakuta is written as a blooming Tarou.”

She typed in his name as instructed.

Then, she looked up from the phone and gave him a long look.

“My name’s Shouko Makinohara.”

The moment he heard this name, Sakuta’s heart started beating so hard it hurt. But it took his brain longer to catch up.

He blinked several times. Then he finally worked out just what had been bugging him. He knew that name. No wonder he felt like he’d met her before. It made sense—but also begged a much bigger question.

“What did you say?”

“My name’s Shouko Makinohara.”

The junior high school girl in front of him had the same name as the high school girl who’d been Sakuta’s first love.

Afterword

This is the second volume in the *Rascal* series.

The first volume's title was *Rascal Does Not Dream of Bunny Girl Senpai*, so if this book has piqued your interest, I recommend reading that one as well.

As you can see, this series has taken the reckless approach of changing the title every time instead of using numbers.

Sorry for making it so hard to determine the order.

But I'm sure my editor, Aragi, will find a way to make it clear, even if he has to rely on the bellyband ads wrapped around the books. It'll work out somehow!

Maybe Keji Mizoguchi will find some miraculous way of including the volume number in the cover illustrations.

Thanks in advance!

At any rate, the title for Volume 3 will be *Rascal Does Not Dream of...* something or other. What will it be?!

Whether your guesses are right or not, you'll have to wait to find out.

Mizoguchi, Aragi, thanks for everything once again. I look forward to working with you next time.

Finally, my heartfelt gratitude to all the readers who've stuck with me.

The third volume should come out before the cold weather passes...I hope.

Hajime Kamoshida

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